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MIKE SHAYNE
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JUNE, 1962 Vol. 11, No. 1

AN EXCITING SHORT NOVEL

THE SCARLET BOX

by PETER QUENTIN

Even amidst the bright gaiety of spring tourist Rome there are tapestries of a darker weave . . . for that ancient city has never been a stranger to intrigue and murder.

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The Murder Stamps

The exclusive Florida Cay hardly seemed a promising target for a blackmailer, and murderer . . . until Mike started probing.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

IT WAS TWO minutes before noon, and two minutes after twelve Michael Shayne would be off to his luncheon appointment with Tim Rourke. With his long legs sprawled across his desk, his rugged, broad-shouldered body tilting his swivel chair, the redhead was quietly sipping a cognac when Lucy Hamilton's cheerful voice came through the inter-com from her reception desk outside.

"Michael, it's a Mr. Platt calling from Ocean Cay. He says he met you there a couple of years ago when you were working on Judge Barry's case. From the tone of his voice, it must be urgent."

"I believe I remember a guy named Platt," Shayne said. "I think he has a real estate agency. Okay, angel, put him on."

"Hello, Mike," the voice came through with nervous anxiety. "I'm sure glad I got you in your

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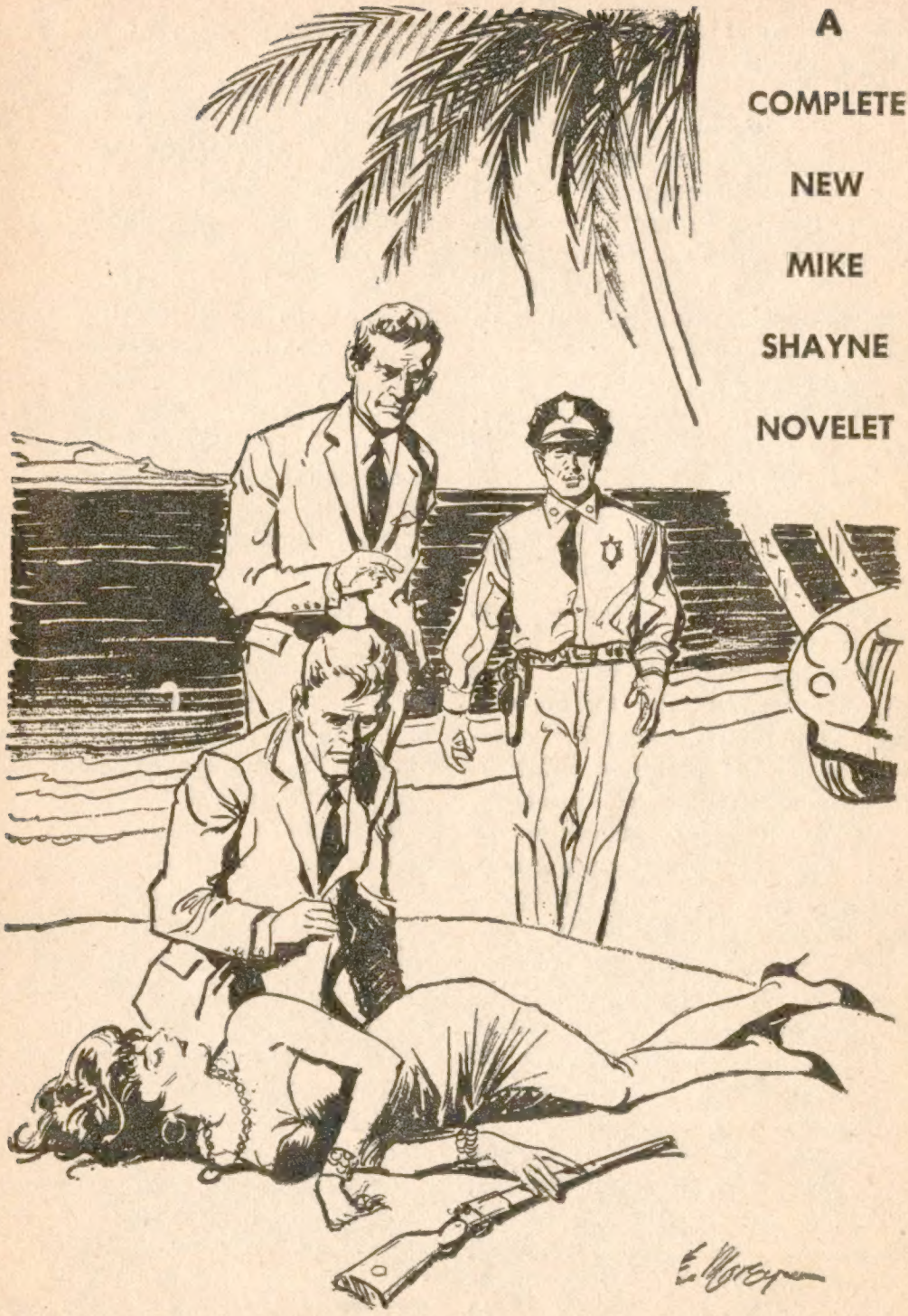

A

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NEW

MIKE

SHAYNE

NOVELET

office. I must see you at once. Crazy things are happening out here."

Shayne tugged at his left earlobe, searching his memory, trying to recall the man and his first name. It came to him in a sudden flash. Glenn. Yes, Glenn Platt!

"It's been a long time, Glenn," Shayne said quietly. "What's crazy in Ocean Cay?"

"Mike, I've got to see you right away. It's a frightful business. Terribly serious and getting worse all the time."

"Can you make it around three?" Shayne asked. "I'm busy until then. Okay, Glenn?"

"You bet—and thanks, Mike. I'll be there at three!"

Hanging up, Mike Shayne asked Lucy for the Ocean Cay file. Thumbing through it, he reviewed all the pertinent information regarding the attractive, white-coral beach island which was mostly owned and maintained by a congenial group of private families, for business, their own pleasure and for invited guests. Actually, its reputation was more nearly that of one of the privately owned islands off the coast of New England than a subtropical paradise.

Shayne left for his luncheon appointment with Tim Roarke, Miami's gift to the newspaper profession and his closest friend, despite the difference in temperament which led, at times, to friendly clashes between them. An hour later, leaving the restaurant, Shayne accompanied Tim Roarke to the latter's office, as they had previously arranged. The redhead wanted to check on a newspaper item relating to a case he was considering.

At a few minutes before three, Shayne was back in his Flagler Street office and found Lucy talking with a deeply-tanned man whose dark eyes were obviously uneasy. Restlessly, and with evident relief, he strode toward Shayne.

After shaking hands, the redhead nodded toward his office. "In here, Glenn," he said, leading the way.

Once behind his desk, and making sure that his visitor was in a comfortable chair facing him, Shayne didn't have to encourage Glenn Platt to talk.

The man's agitation was so acute that his first sputtering words were unintelligible.

"Let's take it easy," Shayne said kindly. "Suppose we start at the beginning again. I've got all afternoon."

With a grateful smile and a nervous gesture of his left hand, Platt leaned forward in his chair. "Thanks, Mike," he said. "I'm straightened away now. As I said on the phone, strange things are happening on Ocean Cay. For nearly twenty months now on the Cay we've tried our best to keep

it a secret. But it's gone beyond that. I just had to come to you.

"Several people have been receiving mysterious letters. They haven't the slightest clue as to the identity of the writer. To call them poison pen letters would not be an under-statement. Each one of them contains intimate, wholly malicious information about the recipient."

"Isn't that really a police matter?" Shayne asked. "Have you informed the local police? I've worked with Lieutenant Bob Edwards, of the State Police, who covers your area, and I can assure you he's an efficient guy, always on the ball!"

"We got in touch with him about it, Mike. That was six months ago, when the letters first came through. Edwards has had no luck at all in tracing the writer."

"Well, where do I come in? So far, if this follows the usual pattern, I imagine there's only been threats and a lot of uneasiness. Isn't that so? Poison pen letters are a violation of personal privacy and a potential menace. But I doubt if the situation's one for me to get involved in, Glenn, right now."

"I'm hoping you'll change your mind about that, Mike. The letters are striking close to home. My fiancee, Alma Schlagle, has been frightened out of her wits lately. She's a very stubborn girl

and has refused to tell me the reason for her anxiety. But I'm as certain as I'm sitting here that she's gotten one or more of these letters. She's frightened to death, and it's more than I can take, because I happen to be very much in love with her."

Shayne frowned. "Is there any reason why she'd want to conceal anything in her life?" he asked. "Something in the past that's just catching up with her now?"

Platt shook his head, wet his lips nervously. "I doubt it," he said. "But I have a feeling that if you'd just have a talk with her she might tell you more than she's told me. The anxiety is wearing her down, Mike. And that's my main

concern. But the suspicion that devil has planted in a dozen or more minds is an ugly thing for all of us. I'm pretty sure blackmail is his ultimate aim."

The redhead stared out of the window for a few seconds, mulling over what the agitated man sitting opposite him had said.

"But you aren't absolutely sure Alma's really getting these letters," he pointed out finally. "It may be something of an entirely different nature. It doesn't take much to upset some women."

"Her acute despondency convinces me that it must be the letters," Platt insisted. "She has no reason to feel depressed otherwise. Until this year I've had a hard struggle to stay solvent. But the new real estate boom on the keys below Miami has given my business a shot in the arm. I'm handling a shopping center development in Ocean Cay, and we'd planned to get married soon."

In his eagerness to impress Shayne with his earnestness, Platt almost slipped off the edge of his chair. "Mike, I couldn't give her the kind of life she's always been used to until now. I want you to come out and investigate this thing." He stopped shortly and lowered his voice almost to a whisper, "I'm afraid that Alma might do something rash."

Shayne worried his lower lip imperceptibly. Then he rose slowly. "All right, Glenn. If there's anyone who deserves to have the book thrown at him, it's a poison pen writer, especially if he's mixed up with blackmail. And if it's causing you this much anxiety, then I ought to see what I can do."

There was genuine concern in his voice. Ordinarily he didn't much care for a case of light-shunning, often justly concealed skeletons in the family closet. Corpses on the doorstep were his usual lethal legacy, and more clear-cut guilt attached to the party, or parties, who had placed them there. But there were times when deep sympathy for a friend in trouble could tip the scales in the opposite direction.

After leaving word with Lucy where he might be staying overnight in Ocean Cay, he led Platt to the parking lot and they got into the redhead's car.

The fading sun was casting long streamers of radiance across the green surf as Shayne and Platt continued directly south on the Key West-Miami Causeway. Since a friend had driven Platt into Miami, Shayne was now driving both of them to the little island. The bright green palmettos rising from darker shrubbery gave some of the landscape an aspect of contrasting beauty which broke the monotony of longer stretches of empty sea and sky.

As they approached Ocean Cay itself they raced over crushed pavement lined with lofty royal

palms. A sparkling cove at their right was a delightful sight. Riding at anchor in the sun-dappled water were several slick sloops with brightly painted green and white hulls, and four pure white schooners with fine brasswork at bow and stern.

A family of boats in an atmosphere of dignity and beauty, Shayne thought, breathing in the strong sea air.

In a matter of minutes they were before Alma Schlagle's white rambling two-story house, facing the water. Platt had informed Shayne that his fiancee had inherited the dwelling from her father who had died in a plane crash with Alma's mother five years previously. Alma had no close relations now. Expertly trimmed shrubbery and a few tall cactus plants surrounded the dwelling and contrasted charmingly with the pink-tiled roof.

But, to an extent which Shayne could hardly have anticipated, the young attractive woman who greeted them outside seemed reluctant to extend any charm or graciousness after the introductions had been completed.

"Mr. Shayne," Alma Schlagle said in a low voice. "I'm sorry you came. Glenn should never have suggested it. There's nothing at all to discuss."

Platt approached his fiancee and put his hand on her shoulder. "I know it's been a strain, dear.

But please, for my sake, try to cooperate with us. Mike's here to help you and I'm sure he can. If you wish to discuss your problem with him privately I'll leave you two alone."

Without waiting for an answer Platt turned his back on her and walked slowly toward the beach. As he passed Shayne there was a look of pleading urgency in his eyes.

As soon as they were alone, Alma turned to Shayne. "I know you've come a long way. The least I can do is to invite you inside for a moment or two."

She led the redhead into her home and through to the taste-

fully furnished living room. Motioning Shayne to a comfortable armchair she seated herself in an antique hard-backed chair.

She turned her strained, white face to stare intently at the redhead. "I can only repeat to you, Mr. Shayne," she said, "exactly what I've told Glenn. Nothing is wrong. He's just imagining things. You must believe me!"

Her tone seemed final and just a bit cold. But beneath it Shayne could sense a mounting fear which she was powerless to control.

He looked at her sympathetically, and smiled. For a fraction of a second the young woman seemed on the verge of breaking down and confiding in him. But with what was obviously an effort she managed to maintain her self-control.

"It's getting late," she said. "Don't you think you'd better be on your way? You've a long trip to Miami! Glenn must be still on the beach. I'll go get him."

Shayne arose and slowly followed her to the door. He lit a cigarette, took a long draw, and said, "The last thing I'd ever want to do, Alma, is intrude. Glenn convinced me that you were in some kind of trouble. I didn't like what I heard. I came because I believed I could be of some help to you.

He paused for an instant, then went on earnestly, "I'm convinced now more than ever that Glenn was justified in consulting me. You *are* in trouble. But you obviously want to find your own way out of it. I hope you do, and I admire your independence. But, seriously, I don't think you can do it on your own. If you need me just remember I'll do everything I can to help. A phone call is easy to make. Better take the weekend to think it over."

As he walked away Shayne sensed he'd made a slight impression. He hesitated in the pathway, their eyes meeting once more as he glanced back at her. But he could see that she still wasn't ready to accept his help. He continued to walk slowly toward his car.

On his way home, and just before entering Coral Gables, the redhead stopped at *Wharf's End,* a popular eating place he and Lucy Hamilton often frequented. The restaurant featured grilled pompano, baked eggplant and the most tasty popovers in lower Florida. The appetizing fare compensated somewhat for the futility of his trip to Ocean Cay.

At a table next to him, Shayne saw an attractive brunette wearing a green dress and large circular gold ear-rings. The ear-rings, the bright satiny sheen of the dress and her slightly wind-ruffled hair gave her a wild gypsy-look. He recognized her escort, Frank F. Moors, a publicity man from

Miami Beach. They obviously had been drinking quite a bit, for they were talking too loudly. Shayne almost liked the girl until he heard her voice.

"And they rejected the last book, too," she said, viciously digging into her lobster, "after I went to so much trouble with the research. Well, I can't help it if they're too stupid to recognize a best-seller when they have one right in their laps."

Moors was paying more attention to his drink than to her, and the girl, vaguely annoyed, reached over to his side of the table, took the drink from his hand, and deliberately placed it on the floor at her side.

"Wilma," the publicity man said, standing up, "I'm glad they rejected your book. That's not the only thing about you that deserves that fate."

Shayne heard no more, for he'd finished his cognac and walked over to pay the bill. Putting his change into his billfold he asked the cashier if she knew who the gold ear-ringed woman was.

"Oh, that's Wilma Cord from Ocean Cay," the girl said. "She comes here often."

II

IT WAS VERY early Monday morning when Shayne got the tragic news, and was glad that he'd given Glenn Platt his home phone number. It was a badly shaken Platt who informed him of Alma Schlagle's suicide.

"I'm sorry it had to end this way, Glenn," Shayne said. "But I couldn't get anywhere with Alma when I was in Ocean Cay. I gave it a lot of thought over the week-end, and had about decided I'd drive down again early this week, even if I failed to hear from her. I was hoping she'd reconsider and call me this morning."

"You did all you could, I realize that, Mike. But she wouldn't confide in anyone—not even in me."

"Glenn, let's not kid ourselves," Shayne said. "No matter how you slice it—it's murder in my book. If Alma killed herself over poison pen letters, the sender is a murderer. Give me a few hours in my office this morning and I'll drive down. I'll meet you at your office early in the afternoon."

"Okay, Mike," Platt said. "Just as you say—"

"One more thing," Shayne said. "You'd better get in touch with Lieutenant Edwards and tell him I'm on the case. It will rest better with him if it comes directly from you."

Shayne surprised Lucy by coming into the office within minutes after she had arrived punctually at nine o'clock. He gave her the tragic news of Alma Schlagle's suicide and told her he was driving down to Ocean Cay as soon as they

cleaned up things in the office during the morning.

Assisted by Lucy's usual efficiency the redhead was able to get away before noon.

It was another nice day and Shayne decided he'd continue south and not stop for lunch until he reached *Wharf's End.* After all, he might run into the girl with the gold ear-rings. He couldn't have explained why but he felt somehow it might pay him to have a talk with Wilma Cord, though nothing as yet remotely pointed to her.

The rest of the trip was completed without traffic holdups or delays of any kind and presently he was pulling up his car in front of Glenn Platt's newly decorated real estate office. It was apparent when Shayne shook Glenn's outstretched hand that the man who'd brought him into the case was extremely depressed and it had been a shattering blow to him.

"Mike," Platt said slowly, "how could it have happened? I just can't understand it. Alma must have been under almost unbelievable tension to have taken her life. It's hard to see how she could have been involved in any kind of mess rotten enough to make her do such a thing."

"That's what I'm down here for, Glenn," said Shayne. "And I'm not returning to Miami until we know a great deal more than we do now. I've a feeling it won't take long to turn up a clue that will lead somewhere."

Glenn stirred uneasily in his chair, his face white with tension and grief. "Mike, I hope to God my bringing you down to see Alma the other day didn't precipitate her decision to commit suicide. It's a terrible thing to have on one's conscience."

"Now, none of that nonsense," Shayne said. "You can't blame yourself. Obviously, Alma was at the cracking point and it's a pity we didn't get to her a bit earlier." The redhead leaned closer to Glenn. "I understand you found her dead when you went to her cottage this morning. Is that right?"

"Yes, Mike. I'd talked to her last night just before midnight. I called her to find out how she was feeling. She seemed awfully upset, but told me she was glad I had called. Nevertheless, I could tell by her voice, that she was laboring under great tension. That's why I dropped by early this morning."

The redhead leaned back in his chair, giving Glenn a chance to get hold of his emotions. Then Shayne said, "In many instances, a suicide leaves a letter. Did she by any chance leave one for you?"

The stricken eyes of the real estate agent wavered before Shayne's steady scrutiny. "Yes, she did, Mike," he said, slowly. "But I assure you it had absolutely nothing to do with what happened. And for

that reason, and because it's of a very personal nature—I wasn't going to tell you about it. I don't want to show it to anybody."

"I see," Shayne said, studying Glenn's worn face and gloomy eyes more carefully. "But I have to start somewhere, and there may be something in it that could give me a lead. I'm here to find out who has been writing poison pen letters. Apparently Alma took her life because of those letters."

"I know, Mike," Platt said. "But I'd rather not show it to you. I give you my word there's nothing in it that could help you in any way."

Shayne decided not to press Platt further until he'd made a little more of a start in a general way. "I presume you called Lieutenant Edwards immediately and he can be found at the Schlagle home," he said. "I'll run over there and have a talk with him."

Platt got up from behind his desk and paced his office. Shayne wondered what was going through the man's mind. Finally the real estate dealer stopped in front of the redhead.

"When I talked to Lieutenant Edwards at Alma's home I told him that I had engaged you. Chances are he's still there and will be expecting you. He's grief-stricken over Alma's death. He has known her for many years, you know."

After promising Glenn he'd call him later in the day the redhead

went directly to Alma Schlagle's home. Platt had given him a key, even though there was a strong possibility that Edwards would be on hand to let him in.

The house seemed to have an atmosphere of grimness and Shayne had to use the key, for no one answered the doorbell. He opened all the doors to let air and sun inside, and dispel the gloom. He was rather glad that the police were nowhere on the premises, for it gave him an opportunity to make a thorough search of the house.

Evidently Edwards hadn't made a thorough search as yet and had contented himself with taking the body to the local mortuary. Shayne's painstaking examination of all the rooms was not in vain.

In Alma Schlagle's bedroom he found a bunch of letters tied together with a red ribbon. They were neatly placed in her bottom bureau drawer and three pink nylon-and-lace slips rested on top of the bundle. Every letter, after a hasty perusal, seemed unworthy of

suspicion. They were all from a relative in Wyoming.

However, there was a single, empty grey envelope on the bottom of the stack. It was postmarked *Ocean Cay,* and the envelope was addressed by typewriter and had been mailed the previous month.

There was nothing in it, but it interested Shayne considerably, for it was not the kind of envelope which would ordinarily have been used for bills or for an invitation to a party. Who, he wondered, would write a letter in this small community to somebody he'd see at the club or beach or grocery daily?

He re-tied the entire bunch of envelopes to take with him. Then he carefully closed all the windows and made sure the doors were locked before he left.

Shayne was glad to be out of the house. He took a deep breath of fresh clean air as he passed the well-kept shrubbery and cacti outside. He put the packet of letters in his pocket and as he started the engine dwelt moodily on the unpleasant aspects of being a detective. Not the least of these was that it involved prying into the most intimate details, and reading the personal letters of a cultured, attractive woman too wretchedly anguished to want to stay alive.

Shayne knew the road to the local police headquarters as soon as he hit the main street. He hoped Lieutenant Edwards of the State Police would be there. In a few minutes, he was parking his car outside the office. When the policeman on duty announced Shayne by name, Lieutenant Bob Edwards came outside and gave the redhead a warm welcome, ushering him inside where they could talk in private.

"It's good to see you again, Mike," he said. "It's a long time since we worked on a case together."

Shayne nodded. "I was thinking the same thing," he said. "This kind of case is certainly off my line. But I hate the smell of what's behind it. Blackmail, apparently, and malicious threats. Bad enough to drive a woman like Alma Schlagle to suicide. What have you got to go on so far?"

"Since Glenn Platt has retained you on the case," said Edwards, "I'm sure he's told you that this business started some twenty months ago. I've never been able to find out just how many people received the poison pen letters. Only two of the Ocean Cay people who received letters eventually came to me—Raymond Steele and Patricia Moody. The letters were always mailed right here in Ocean Cay.

"So we can be pretty sure—though of course we can't prove it—that the writer lives here. In Alma's case, we've got to remember

we haven't actually seen a letter addressed to her, Mike."

"But there's no other explanation that holds water," Shayne pointed out. "Glenn Platt is very sure she must have received one or more letters. But why should they be mailed right here instead of on the mainland. Did someone with a definite purpose in mind consider it was important to bring it close to this small community? A perverse someone, perhaps?

"Incidentally, Bob," Shayne went on, "would you mind if I looked over your files on this letter business."

"Be glad to, Mike. I'm up a tree myself. We haven't been able to track the typewriter used, mainly because we haven't a good suspect."

Lieutenant Edwards left the room and returned almost immediately with a large manilla envelope. He pointed to a desk across from his. "You sit there, Mike, and go to work. And if you need any assistance, don't hesitate to call on me."

Shayne drew a chair up to the desk Lieutenant Edwards had assigned him, and opened the large envelope. He pulled out several typewritten reports and nine letters. Shayne noticed that each envelope was exactly like the grey one he'd found at Alma Schlagle's and brought along to show Edwards.

Quickly, the redhead went through the manilla folder concentrating on the letters received by Raymond Steel and Patricia Moody. Each letter was a veiled threat, dripping with venom. The first letter addressed to Steele said: *I know all about Stan and Fay and I intend to tell the world what I know.* And the first letter addressed to Patricia Moody was equally vicious: *I know all about you and Bob and I intend to tell the world what I know. There is nothing you can do to prevent it.* And the follow-up letters to Raymond Steele and Patricia Moody were even more vicious in their intimate details.

Each letter was written on simple grey writing paper and the envelopes matched the one Shayne had just taken from the bottom bureau drawer in Alma Schlagle's bedroom.

When he finished with the files, Shayne showed Lieutenant Edwards the envelope sent to Alma. "It's identical to the others in your files," he said. "So we can be certain that Alma also received a poison pen letter."

Edwards examined the grey envelopes. "Sure, it's the same," he said. "No doubt about it. I've checked on the stationery. It was not bought on the Cay, Mike. We're certain of that. It could have been sold anywhere, as it's just inexpensive writing paper, with envelopes to match. And neither Ray Steele or Pat Moody know or

can even recall anyone who could hate them enough to expose an intimate family matter of the past, with tragic consequences to many people."

Shayne held one of the letters up to the light. "And the prints on the letters and envelopes," he asked. "Did they get you anywhere?"

Edwards shook his head. "I had them checked and they don't belong to any known, dangerous criminals, Mike." He fumbled with the files in apparent disgust.

The redhead remained silent for a moment, his brows drawn together in a heavy frown. Finally, he looked up at Edwards who was watching him intently.

"I've got an idea," Shayne said. "And it might work. Obviously, the letters have all been mailed from Ocean Cay. The postmarks are very clear. Maybe the suicide of Alma Schlagle will not prevent the writer from sending further notes. The chances are pretty good, I feel, that the man who sent the letters bought the stamps right here at Ocean Cay. And marked stamps would establish a controlled test. I found out yesterday that the only place where stamps are sold is in the grocery and post-office combination that serves the entire island. Now, can you trust the local postmaster, Bob?"

"You bet, Mike!" There was excitement in the police officer's voice. "Damn good idea. And they don't come as honest as Leroy Jones. If you run short of stamps you either have to buy them from him or take a trip to the mainland."

Edwards paused an instant, then went on: "I happen to know that Jones feels it's a blow to his code of clean ethics that stamps he's sold may have been used as targets for dirty blackmail. You see, Mike, even though we've managed to keep the poison pen letters from the newspapers, many people in town know about them. It's hard to keep anything a secret on a small, well-knit island like Ocean Cay."

"I see what you mean," said Shayne. "Could you get Leroy Jones here? If we want to score a bull's-eye on this thing, we'll need Jones' cooperation."

Lieutenant Edwards nodded and walked to the phone and inside of fifteen minutes the postmaster was with the two men. Leroy Jones was a friendly, tanned man and Shayne had an instant feeling that he could be trusted completely.

Shayne wasted no time in giving him a quck run-down on his idea. "As I've just been telling Lieutenant Edwards, if the stamps were bought in Ocean Cay, they had to be bought at your place. And a controlled test, if nothing else, would help eliminate some innocent people who might otherwise come under suspicion. We'll have to code certain stamps."

"I'll be more than happy to cooperate with you, Mr. Shayne," Jones said. "Just tell me what I have to do and you can be damned sure it'll be done. This is the most reprehensible thing that has ever happened to Ocean Cay."

Shayne stood up. "Then I suggest we go to the post office at once, Mr. Jones," he said. "We'll treat certain blocks of stamps microchemically. We don't know whether or not Alma's suicide has given the writer such a jolt that he'll stay cautious and write no more letters, for a while at least.

"On the other hand, the person is obviously treacherous, and having gone this far—" Shayne shrugged. "Who knows what a sick mind will do? We've nothing to lose. And it just may work."

Lieutenant Edwards got up from behind his desk and nodded, a look of approval in his eyes. "Exactly, Mike. I'm with you. And after these blocks of stamps are treated microchemically—what then?"

"Each batch will bear an invisible code number identifying the date and lot. To avoid a mix-up, or fumbling with the other stamps, Jones should keep the marked stamps in strips of two, and make a note of the men and women who buy them."

At the post office, Shayne's trick to catch the criminal was put into effect by one of Lieutenant Edwards' young men who was an

expert in such matters. And Leroy Jones knew exactly what to do.

Before three in the afternoon Leroy Jones had reported to Shayne and Edwards that he had sold stamps to half a dozen people and had carefully made a note of their names.

Astonishingly enough, the very next morning a grey envelope showed up addressed to Patricia Moody, and bearing a stamp from the series Leroy Jones had marked and sold. With feverish excitement, Shayne, Edwards and Jones, in the latter's private office, went through the list of those who had bought the stamps.

Jones' check-list showed that two stamps had been purchased by Will Prime, owner of the only movie theatre on the Cay. Six had been bought by Earl Scrivener, who owned the largest beverage company in town. Three people in

town had bought one stamp each, instantly placed them on the envelopes they had with them, and deposited the letters in the mail box.

None of the three had used a grey envelope and the letters bore out-of-town addresses. Jones explained that Will Prime could not use a typewriter, and did not own one. And Earl Scrivener had also used his stamps immediately, in sight of Jones, affixing them to a heavy manilla envelope which he had dropped into the mailbox before leaving the store.

The sixth purchaser of stamps had been a young woman. She had bought twenty stamps.

Jones checked his well-kept records, with Shayne and Edwards peering over his shoulder, placed his long yellow pencil behind his right ear and said, "You don't know folks around here, Mr. Shayne, so names don't mean too much to you. But the gal who bought these particular stamps is Wilma Cord."

Shayne frowned, his mind going back to a hastily-eaten meal finished off with a cognac which he had been too troubled to really enjoy. "Wilma Cord," he repeated. "Does she sometimes wear large gold ear-rings, Mr. Jones?"

"Yes. How'd you know?"

The redhead turned to Lieutenant Edwards. "This may be a wild bunker drive, a mile short of the green," he said. "But it may just possibly be the break we're looking for. The day I came down to talk to Alma Schlagle I drove back to Miami and stopped off at *Wharf's End* for dinner. And sitting at the next table with a man I recognized was a woman who talked too loud. She was complaining about a book she'd written that had been rejected. She wore large, gold ear-rings and on my way out I asked the cashier who she was, and was told it was Wilma Cord."

Shayne turned to Lieutenant Edwards. "She could very well be the little lady we're after. Take a good look at the stamp on the letter addressed to Miss Moody. It's one of the stamps she purchased just yesterday."

Edwards very carefully examined the letter and saw that the marked stamp was on it and that it was one of those purchased by Wilma Cord. He frowned. "Mike," he said cautiously, "let's not jump to conclusions so easily. It'll be tough to make the stamp stand up in court. Our next step is to examine her typewriter, and that'll be a job."

Shayne sat back thoughtfully. Still silent he dug into his pocket and brought out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and took his time lighting one. Then he turned his gaze to Jones. "How long has Wilma Cord lived here, Roy?" he asked.

"A practical newcomer—only

about six years, Mike. My wife, who's been tidying up her house a couple of times a week, knows more about her than most people. If you want to talk to her, we couldn't have picked a better moment. She's in front of the store right now. I'll call her."

In a few minutes Leroy Jones came back with his wife. "Lucille, this is Mr. Michael Shayne. As you know, he's here on the poison-pen letter problem. Anything you can tell him about Wilma Cord will be appreciated."

Shayne smiled at the matronly woman and warmly shook her hand. "Mrs. Jones, we aren't too certain about Miss Cord. But we've narrowed it down to a few suspects, and she may be one of them. We'd like to know something about her—anything of importance that occurs to you that might suggest she would be capable of furtive maliciousnes. It takes those qualities to be a poison-pen writer."

Mrs. Jones puckered her brows in thought. "I really wish I could help you, Mr. Shayne, but I'm afraid I don't know too much about the lady. She lives alone, has many friends, and gives quite a number of parties, as all of us here do. And she is a writer—or so she claims. I don't believe she has ever had anything published.

"But she is always writing, always busy at her typewriter. I do know she is a divorcee and lives on a monthly alimony that comes regularly from her ex-husband who lives in New York. She has always treated me nicely."

Realizing that she hadn't contributed too much, Mrs. Jones stopped for a long moment to think. "I'm sorry I haven't been of much help," she said. "But Miss Cord has one good friend in town. Miss Deborah Tilden, our town librarian. She spends a lot of time at the library, talks over many things with Miss Tilden—and always comes back with loads of books."

Shayne thanked Mrs. Jones for her assistance and then turned to her husband. "Roy," he asked. "How long has Miss Tilden been in Ocean Cay and do you believe we can trust her by asking questions about Miss Cord?"

"She's only been here about three years. And, come to think of it, I believe she does like Miss Cord because of her sophistication and the fact she is a writer. I'd be careful in questioning her."

III

THE TOWN'S SMALL library was directly across the street from the post office. The library shelves consisted chiefly of books contributed by Ocean Cay's various residents. However, Shayne noticed that there were a good many books of an historic nature, and was surprised.

He noticed that the rather pert young librarian, obviously Deborah Tilden, was approaching him with a smile on her face. "We don't have many detective stories, Mr. Shayne," she said when she reached his side. "I guess that's the sort of reading you came for. Personally, Edgar Allen Poe is the nearest I ever got to mysteries, I'm afraid."

Shayne just gazed at her for a moment. Then he said, "How did you know my name?"

Deborah Tilden giggled. "Oh, I've seen your picture in the Miami papers quite often, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne decided to let it rest there. Adroitly he led her on into the subject of books and, indirectly, on to the vital subject of people on Ocean Cay and what they read most. The talkative Miss Tilden never realized she was giving the redhead information he was anxious for, particularly when she got on the subject of an author—a Miss Wilma Cord—who actually lived in town, and patronized the library frequently. She even knew Miss Cord's literary agent's name in New York—a Martin Ames. Did Shayne know him?

By this time Shayne was sitting on a chair facing Miss Tilden, who sat behind her librarian's desk. "You must like Miss Cord very much to know so much about her," he said.

"Oh, we're very friendly," said Deborah Tilden. "I help her in her research. If we don't have what she wants, I can send to Miami libraries for books."

"I know this is a leading question, Deborah," said Shayne. "But can she really write?"

"I'm sure she'll sell her new book—it's different from her earlier attempts," said Miss Tilden. "You see, Wilma came into the community to write—a talented and hopeful author with a tremendous flare for historical research. She had thought she was going to be another Kenneth Roberts. She was so enthusiastic about her novel that the usually standoffish islanders broke down and let her browse through old attic trunks and diaries. There is no doubt she has great research ability. But she hasn't learned the writing craft too well, I'm afraid, and her two previous historical books had been rejected."

As Shayne listened the morbid mosaic pattern seemed to be falling into concrete shape. He hoped Deborah Tilden would keep right on talking. She did. "The rejection of her two historical novels she'd worked so hard at were a shocking blow to her vanity," the librarian went on.

"You won't believe this, Mr. Shayne, but Wilma reacted by going violently to the other extreme. She said if the publishers wouldn't take serious historical copy then she'd give them dirt. Using her

knowledge of family traits and tendencies she set out to expose the secret contemporary scene, stressing its seamy and sordid side. I've read some of the book, and it's like *Peyton Place,* only more fascinating because it's about people I know around here. I'll bet she sells it eventually. It may well become a best seller."

Promising to come back in a day or so, Shayne took his departure.

When Shayne got back to his hotel he put through a long-distance call to Martin Ames in New York. The literary agent was in, and cantankerous on the subject of Wilma Cord. He spoke freely about it, for they'd quarrelled about three months ago.

"I worked hard trying to sell her historical novels," Ames went on. "Worse books are being published. But this last book of hers—hell, the material is so candid that five leading publishers literally beat their brains out trying to devise a way in which they could suggest revision. In the end, all of them regretfully rejected it. Her revision was terrible. The occasionally honest writing degenerated into nothing but obscenity. I had to send it back to her. Sex has to be handled with a certain finesse, no matter how outspoken you are."

"How did she take the rejection?" Shayne asked.

"She was so angry she refused to believe that her precious masterpiece could be rejected upon its own lack of merit. She blamed it all on mysterious influences among the old families plotting against her with their Knickerbocker cousins in New York. She had developed acute paranoia, of course. But I don't know how in hell anybody in her community could have known what kind of a book it was."

Shayne thanked Martin Ames and slowly replaced the receiver in its cradle. Obviously, no one suspected her—for a considerable time had passed since the poison pen letters had been sent and everyone Shayne had talked to about her still thought her a likeable, talented girl who was trying to write an historical novel about the locality.

Shayne had surely not thought of her himself when he went through the files Lieutenant Edwards gave him. It had not occurred to him that any outsider could be so intimate with family skeletons and the private lives of the secretive islanders. It was amazing that the letters were written by a relative newcomer, an outsider to the close-knit community. The stuff in those letters required not only damned resourceful modern detective work, but intimate knowledge of the island families, some of it reaching back a hundred years.

Shayne sat at his desk now, trying to conjure up just what Alma

might have told her fiance. He felt it most important, for if he picked up Wilma Cord at this point on simple poison-pen charges, a smart lawyer would get her off with a relatively short sentence. But if he could hand the police evidence of blackmail, extortion tied in with a suicide, Wilma Cord would get her just deserts. Although Alma was the only public tragedy so far, Glenn had told Shayne Wilma Cord had destroyed the equilibrium of at least nine old-line island families.

And now, unless Glenn Platt opened up, there'd be no real justice, no real retribution. But Shayne couldn't wait much longer to have Wilma Cord arrested.

Shayne decided to go back to the post office and find out from Leroy Jones if any other grey envelopes had come through that day. Shayne was talking to Jones when the postmaster suddenly said, "Excuse me a minute, Mr. Shayne. Here comes Miss Wilma Cord. I've ordered typewriting paper and some new ribbons for her."

The girl walked gracefully as she came into the general store. Shayne felt she was purposefully ignoring him, and he was annoyed at her manner. She must know who he was, since everybody else in town did.

She took a tiny Mexican coin purse out of her large straw bag and paid Jones in cash. It was as though she were granting him a favor. "I'm driving into Miami today, Mr. Jones. Had I known it would have taken you so frightfully long to round up these things I could have waited and bought them all there."

Then she turned squarely around, her gold ear-rings flashing, and trained her gaze on the redhead.

"Hello there, Mr. Shayne," she said. "By chance you don't want a quick ride back to civilization, do you?"

The redhead was one step

ahead of her as he smiled into her wide grey eyes. "How long will you be away?"

"Overnight."

"No, thanks! I've unfinished business here in town," he said.

"I hope business is good, Mr. Shayne," she said, and left without looking back at him.

Shayne turned to Leroy Jones. "May I use your phone," he asked, and long-legged it to Jones' private office in the back of the store without waiting for his answer.

He dialed Lieutenant Edwards and in a moment was talking to him hurriedly. "Bob, this is Shayne. Can't say too much now. But Wilma Cord just left the post office and is going to drive to Miami overnight. Since you're at the end of town, will you call me back as soon as she passes your place and is on the causeway heading for Miami. I'll explain when you call back." He hung up without elaborating further.

He sat back on his chair to wait patiently for Edwards' call. In ten short minutes the phone rang. It was Edwards. "Mike," he said. "Wilma Cord just breezed by in her red Fiat, heading toward Miami. What's on your mind?"

"Just a little matter of something you shouldn't know about. But I'll tell you anyway. Things are breaking fast. I'm sure we made no mistake in putting Wilma first on our list. She'll be gone overnight. I'm on my way to examine an author's typewriter. I'll keep in touch."

He hung up without giving Edwards a chance to reply.

IV

WITH HIS OWN emergency-dictated fine disregard for the law on special occasions, Mike Shayne drove to Wilma Cord's sequestered home. Though the front door was locked, Miss Cord had fortunately left open one of the windows leading directly into the living room.

A quick tour of the place convinced the redhead that Wilma was a good housekeeper and kept her beautifully furnished cottage as neat as a pin.

"Looks as though she's a dedicated writer, all right," he said to himself, as he saw three typewriters in the house. One was in the living room and two were on separate desks in her small library.

Shayne felt that one of these had to be the machine which had been used for the poison pen letters. He quickly tested all three of them, punching the letters *a s d g f* in the middle row, and *m n b v c* on the bottom row of letters.

Much to the redhead's chagrin and disappointment, none of the type matched up, and Shayne cursed quietly to himself. There absolutely had to be a fourth typewriter, he felt positive. But where was it? And was she apprehensive enough to hide it pur-

posefully, now that she knew he was in town? The mystery of the missing machine was, Shayne felt strongly, the next most urgent step in his investigation.

Leaving the library he went through the hall leading to the front door. He was mildly surprised to see a shotgun on a rack, together with a couple of umbrellas.

Shayne drove directly to Lieutenant Bob Edwards' office and the redhead brought the police officer up to date. He explained about the three typewriters and his disappointment. Edwards felt that it was becoming extremely necessary to find the typewriter which had actually been used in the letter writing. He wondered if there was another person involved—and even if Wilma might not be innocent.

"No, Bob," Shayne said. "I'm sure Wilma is our gal. And when she realized she was coming under suspicion, she carefully hid it. I'm a bit concerned, too, about Glenn Platt—he hasn't been around to see us since I've come back to Ocean Cay. I don't like the idea of his not showing us Alma Schlagle's suicide note. I can't figure that one out."

Shayne leaned back in his chair, tugging at his earlobe. "For what it may be worth, just a long chance, I'm going to put a call through to Tim Rourke when I get back to my hotel. I'm going to ask him to try to trace a typewriter that may have been pawned in Miami the past few days. There can't be too many hocked, and it might be a way Wilma thought up to keep it out of Ocean Cay until things blow over again."

"I've been up against the typewriter problem," Edwards said, "ever since this thing started. You just can't barge into homes and ask to look at typewriters. But, at least, we do know that Wilma Cord is the sender of the grey envelopes. No use calling her in to talk to her. She'd deny everything and we still can't prove she actually sent those letters."

The redhead got up and slow-paced the small office. Then he turned back to Edwards. "Bob, I'm going to get better acquainted with that girl. I'll try to run into her by accident. She's a talkative dame and I'll bet she's busting to talk to me. Can you find out where she hangs out around town or where she buys her gasoline, for instance. She'll be back tomorrow and I'll hang out in the lobby of my hotel. If you or one of your men spot her at a gas station I can run right over for gas myself and gain her confidence by talking about her books. She won't have to know it's another kind of writing I'm interested in.

"I believe she gets her gas at Don Dalton's. I've seen her there often. But I'll check and call you."

Shayne returned to his hotel to

make a few telephone calls, to Tim Rourke and especially to Lucy Hamilton.

The next morning, bright and early, right after breakfast, he took his place in the lobby. From the comfortable easy chair he could look through the large plate glass fronting the main street of Ocean Cay. He realized it might be a long and tedious vigil. But he had to talk to Wilma Cord and had to do it without rousing her suspicions that she might be a prime suspect.

The break came earlier than he expected. At ten minutes to eleven Wilma Cord in her red Fiat came roaring down the main street, passing the hotel in a crimson streak. She was obviously on her way home and he hoped she'd stop at Dalton's for gas. There was a very good chance she might, for Edwards had called and said that she bought her gas there and charged it to her account, sometimes taking months to pay.

Shayne waited patiently for a call from Lieutenant Edwards. It came through in about a half hour. Much to his annoyance, Wilma Cord had gone home first to drop off her purchases, and had only just now arrived at Dalton's. She was not only getting gasoline, but was having her oil changed and it would take about fifteen minutes. Since her home was more than a couple of miles outside of town, she'd probably hang around.

Fortunately, Shayne didn't need the pretext of stopping at Dalton's for gasoline, for his car did need at least ten gallons. As he drove into the station he noticed Wilma talking to Dalton himself.

Shayne was just about to get out of his car when the unpredictable Miss Cord strolled over to him.

"Why, Mister Detective Shayne!" she greeted him in mock surprise. "Still investigating an ordinary suicide?"

"Alma Schlagle's tragedy wasn't so ordinary," Shayne answered, and couldn't keep a shade of snap out of his voice.

She flicked him an appraising glance, then got out her compact to make up while she talked. Shayne noticed particularly the artful way the girl avoided the subject of the poison pen letters which anyone else on Ocean Cay would have immediately asked him about. But she did make one slip of a different nature, either from mocking pride, or perhaps actually hoping to surprise some reaction out of him.

In the course of mentioning crime in general, she asked, "Tell me, Mr. Shayne, just how do detectives gain entrance to search premises without a warrant? I mean, do you all carry master keys, or use a jimmy, or some other equally successful method."

Without batting an eye, Shayne answered, "That's for the story

books. Any detective who committed illegal entry would be up on charges fast."

He cursed silently to himself, wondering if he was getting careless and had left some clue. Shayne got his answer when he noticed Wilma casually examining his tires. What the hell had he done driving right up to her front door? Left his tire tracks plainly for a clever woman to notice and compare later?

If she was now suspicious that she was being investigated, she might destroy the vital typewriter —if she hadn't already done so.

Wilma adroitly got back on the subject of Alma Schlagle and her suicide. "Have you established a reason for what she did?" she asked.

"A woman of Miss Schlagle's intelligence," the redhead said, "must have had a very strong reason. Perhaps fear of disclosure of some indiscretion in her past, or fear of some viciousness in the future."

Shayne picked his words purposefully and watched her closely. But Wilma Cord did not look in the least disconcerted. Instead, she said quite coolly. "Such as a poison pen letter? Why don't you arrest the author of those vicious things and stop all this worry and suspicion?"

Shayne had to hand it to the girl. She'd finally come out into the open and mentioned the letters, voluntarily. But that in itself might not mean too much, for a good many people in town were talking about them. But he wondered if anyone else would have used the term "author" in mentioning the writer of the letters. And since she was the only so-called author in town, she had obviously failed to realize how she had phrased her last question, and inadvertently drawn the web of suspicion tighter about herself.

"You can be assured the *author* will be arrested," he said, and wondered if the emphasis he'd placed on 'author' would make her aware of her blunder. But apparently it did not, for she continued to eye him calmly.

"Naturally, the poor woman must have been frightfully upset to do such a thing. If it really was suicide, of course!" Wilma said, adjusting a gold ear-ring and shutting her compact with a click.

"What gives you the idea it could have been anything else?" Shayne asked.

She looked for a moment as if she might speak, then shrugged. "As a rule, I just don't believe people commit suicide unless they're mentally unbalanced."

"A good many emotional conditions verge on mental unbalance," Shayne pointed out. "Suicide is quite likely to be a simple act of desperation."

"I suppose so," Wilma agreed dubiously. She lighted a cigarette

and expelled the smoke in a long jet. "I heard that she left a note to Glenn Platt but that he wouldn't turn it over to the authorities. Isn't that actually illegal?"

"Well—" he breathed noncommittally.

"I mean," Wilma said, "I would think he'd want to do everything possible to help show she had some real reason. It even looks bad for him this way."

God! Shayne thought, and pulled at his earlobe. *The feline cat—how would she know about the letter? The crooked mazes of the criminal mind! Is she just fishing? Or is she trying to plant a little poison against Glenn Platt?*

"I imagine," he answered dryly, "that Glenn's not in a mood to care much what people think or don't think about him right now."

"Oh, he must be suffering terribly," Wilma admitted quickly. "Particularly if he was in any way responsible—such as a lover's row or something."

She glanced at her watch. "He's so emotional anyway," Wilma added. "So quiet on the surface, until he explodes. Stop by sometime, Mr. Shayne. A writer likes to talk off the record about these things."

She blew a jet of smoke through his open window, nodded and walked over to the pit to see if her car was ready. Shayne had no idea of what lay behind her conversation, but he would have been willing to bet there was a reason.

"If I could just find that typewriter," he growled to himself, as he drove his car out of the station. "It's a standard machine. Big and heavy. It couldn't be concealed easily under a floor board."

Yet he felt he could have picked her up on the evidence of the stamps alone. The truth was, he wanted a hell of a lot more. Not just an air-tight case, but additional material, some additional charges that would stand up in court. He wondered if by any chance, Alma Schlagle had really enclosed a poison pen letter in her last note to Glenn Platt. And could it have actually involved Platt with Alma in some indiscretion? *But why, then, wouldn't Glenn Platt talk?*

On a sudden impulse, Shayne drove out to Glenn's place. It was an old colonial farmhouse on lands enclosing a cove. His motor dory bobbed at its mooring, and a gossamer spiral of smoke rose from his chimney. The redhead doubted if he'd been fishing since Alma Schlagle's death.

Glenn was in the kitchen. He greeted Shayne and asked how things were going. Then he set about putting a pot of fresh coffee on the old wood stove.

"I'm getting somewhere—but slow," Shayne said, sitting down.

"If you're back about the letter," Glenn said, "forget it!"

Shayne looked for a cigarette and found one. "No, I just stopped

by to get your confidential reaction to something. I just ran into Wilma Cord who raised a curious point."

He lifted his eyes as he finished lighting his cigarette, and was surprised to note the rigid tension of Glenn's shoulders as he stood facing the stove. The real estate man said nothing, just waited. But he did not move.

"She raised the point of whether we were dead certain that it had been suicide," Shayne added finally.

The tension went out of Glenn's body. He turned with angry irritation. "These damned gossips! What else would it be?"

"You knew her best. You're completely satisfied?"

"Yes," Glenn nodded, but then added thoughtfully; "But maybe Wilma's point is well taken. When a person is driven to suicide by someone else, where is the dividing line with murder?"

"That's one reason I've been anxious to see Alma's last letter," Shayne murmured softly. "I know a good deal now about the private lives of people here on this island. About some things, I know more than you do. I might see some casual reference to some person in Alma's farewell note that would not have the same meaning to you."

"Such as?"

Shayne shrugged. "Just as a possibility, the poison pen author."

Something streaked through Glenn's dark eyes like lightning through heavy clouds. But Shayne knew that the islanders were a self-contained and cagey lot by nature.

"No," he said. "There was nothing like that." He turned to the stove for the coffee and that was all Shayne could get out of him.

V

THE FOLLOWING morning at the hotel Shayne received a note from Wilma Cord. It was written on a different typewriter and different paper from the poison pen letters. But it bore one of the last series of marked stamps. It stated briefly, "You may be interested to know that Glenn Platt stopped by in a violent mood and threatened me for suggesting that Alma's death might not be suicide."

Shayne frowned. "That does it!" he growled. "He's in danger of blowing his top before I find that damned typewriter! I'll have to pick her up to head off something worse."

The arrest, he knew, would be routine, for there was enough evidence now. He was reaching for his phone to call Lieutenant Edwards when the phone rang. It was the police officer himself and there was excitement in his voice.

"Mike," he said. "Get down here as fast as you can. We've

found Wilma Cord lying face down in the east dunes of Ocean Cay. She was shot to death. Looks like suicide. Nothing has been disturbed yet, and her car registry gave her name as Wilma Cord. It's her, Mike. I've just identified the body."

The news shocked Shayne speechless for a moment. But his voice was steady when he said slowly: "I won't waste any time getting there, that's for sure."

It was Wilma Cord all right, and she was a mess. She lay sprawled in the dunes, almost hidden by clumps of grass, about forty yards from her car, which was parked with the keys in the ignition on the sandy road that ran to the point. She had been hurled back and her whole torso blown wide open by a shotgun blast.

The weapon lay half-covered by the drifting sand and resembled a gun he had seen racked in her hallway.

Shayne was allowed every freedom. The fingerprint man and photographer had not been idle.

"I made sure the gun and steering wheel got a careful dusting," Edwards told Shayne.

Among other items, Shayne suggested they also take photos of what little remained of the dead woman's trail in the sand. There was a significant reason for that. Either Wilma Cord had staggered at intervals, or there had been somebody with her, for at five places Shayne could make out the drifted shallow pits of double foot tracks.

Shayne examined the glove compartment of the car and found nothing of consequence. But Wilma Cord's pocketbook, lying on the front seat, proved the opposite of inconsequential.

It contained two letters, written on the now familiar poison pen typewriter. One was dirty and crumpled, apparently some weeks old, and bore no envelope.

In the familiar, vicious language of the other letters, it stated in effect that unless she divulged certain vaguely referred to information about Alma Schlagle, she might shortly find *herself* branded author of the letters. It warned her not to go to Michael Shayne about the matter unless she wanted details of her rejected book of the island community exposed publicly.

The finger print man interrupted at this point. "I'm damned if I would have bothered even to look myself, but this gun carries other prints beside hers. A man's prints, judging by size and grain."

Shayne turned to Edwards. "I think, Bob, we'd better pick up Glenn Platt and bring him here," he said. "Wilma's suicide makes it look as if we've been wrong about her. I just hope to God it isn't Platt. If it is he, he's sure fooled the hell out of us."

Lieutenant Edwards instructed

one of his deputies to bring in Platt.

The deputy nodded and left. Shayne quickly examined the second letter, which was still in its envelope, addressed to Miss Wilma Cord and mailed at Ocean Cay two days previously. He handed the envelope to the print man to loosen the stamp and then read.

The note was written on the same typewriter and type of paper as the first and said tersely, "Meet me at the dunes with that information at the time I said or you are going to be holding the bag. You are already incriminated with Shayne." Oddly, this note was terminated with two initials—"G.P."

Edwards came over with the stamp tightly caught in a pair of tweezers. He held it up to the light, wet, and another mark showed over the watermark. "That's a former stamp code," he said. "You ordered that series issued only to Glenn Platt and Wilma Cord."

Shayne nodded grimly.

"We've photographed it already," Edwards said. "There's one point of distinction. Two of the perforations were ripped off when the stamp was torn from its strip."

Down on the dunes, the coroner suddenly called out in surprise, and hailed Shayne and Edwards. When they joined him he growled, "Damn you, Shayne, you're right too often with this crazy routine! Even an interne could verify that she was killed by the shotgun blast. But first, she was hit behind the head with some blunt, heavy instrument."

The redhead crouched and the examiner took his stubby hand and guided it up along the dead woman's neck into her thick hair and to a crusty bump just behind one ear. As there was no rock in the dunes that she might have fallen on, the conjecture of a blow was the only alternative.

Shayne left Edwards standing there talking to the coroner and went back to the road and leaned against the car. He felt sweaty, even with the breeze off the sound blowing directly at him. This whole poison pen deal might have been a clever switch. It would not be the first time that one person had been made to appear guilty and without alibi for the crimes of another. But in that case, how account for the necessary switch in stamps? In the first place, the criminal would not know the stamps had been micro-treated.

Or would he? Had Leroy Jones made some slight slip in selling them—a hesitation, a fumble, a sharp interrogatory glance? These island fishermen were canny and smelled each other out like fish, and Glenn Platt, at least, had become successful recently, largely on the strength of his acute and

intimate observation of the people he knew so well.

Yes, Glenn might have caught on, or suspected at least. But if he had, how would he have gotten stamps previously sold only to Wilma Cord? The current series, the stamp on the envelope she carried, posed no problem, of course, as the same kind of stamps had been sold to both of them.

The coroner had gone to the edge of the beach to wash his hands, and now came through the dunes drying them on a handkerchief. "I'll have to perform an autopsy and may not pin it down very close at that," he grunted. "But I'd say, off the record, and without too much to go on, that she died shortly after sunup."

Shayne whispered something to Edwards who turned and signalled over a Shore Patrolman. "You make this patrol about ten o'clock every morning. Ever see anyone hanging around here?" Edwards asked.

"Not often," the man said. "There's only one of these islanders, outside of kids, who ever walks the beach much."

"Who?"

"Well, Glenn Platt often takes a five mile bracer along about sunup if he's not out fishing."

NEXT MONTH **A NEW JOHNNY JULY SHORT NOVEL**

THE BODY ON THE BED

by FRANK STRUAN

In the private-eye profession they have a name for Johnny July's kind of crime-solving ingenuity. It's dynamite in a package deal!

SHAYNE WAS watching the deputy's car bouncing back along the road after picking up Glenn Platt. Glenn's keen eyes swept the scene in one solid, emotionless glance and he nodded.

"So she killed herself before you got her," he said.

"Unless you did," Shayne suggested, looking squarely at Glenn.

"Me?" Glenn gave a jerky laugh. "Just because I went over

and accused her of responsibility for Alma's death?"

"Yes, go on."

Glenn nodded, his face darkening. "Maybe I went too far," he said. "I actually didn't know anything. I was guessing. All Alma told me was: *Watch out for Wilma. She's vicious.*

"But I told Wilma that Alma had given me all the data in her death note and that I wanted every bit of information she had on Alma or I'd break her head open before you got a chance to pick her up."

Shayne studied Glenn's expression. "What did she say to that?"

"Nothing. She screamed for me to get out of her house. She took down a shotgun from the rack in the hall to hurry me. I took it away from her and broke out the shells as a precaution before I left. She was pretty wild—like a frightened tiger."

Glenn had been fingering the car door nervously as he talked, and now Shayne made a barely perceptible sign to the print man and led Glenn over to another spot.

"Now, were you along this beach this morning?" Shayne asked.

Glenn nodded and licked his lips. He was beginning to get grey under his ruddy sea tan. "Yes. I walked up to the point yonder and back to my house at sunup."

"That when you shot Wilma?"

Glenn exploded a curse. "Dammit, Mike, I didn't even see her! Her car wasn't there, I'll tell you that!"

"Take it easy," the redhead said softly. "At this point, I'm just asking questions. Why were you damn fool enough to write that letter to her to meet you here?"

"I wouldn't write that witch a sympathy note if her father had died!" Glenn rasped.

"Funny thing," Shayne said. "It was mailed at Ocean Cay. It bore a stamp you bought last week."

Glenn flushed, and then his face went muddy. "I bought stamps," he agreed. "I bought ten."

"How many you got left."

"Nine," Glenn muttered hoarsely. He thought a minute then add-

ed, "You'll take 'em anyway. Here they are."

He reached to his wallet and handed it over. Shayne extracted a double row of stamps which had been folded into the stamp compartment. One stamp at the top was missing.

The print man came over. Shayne said, "Test those."

The print man nodded and added the cryptic information, "Same prints off the car door just now as those extra prints."

"He's alibied himself already," Shayne grunted on a hardening tone. He stood with his hand rammed into his pants pockets, saying nothing and letting Glenn sweat while the print man ran the stamps through a solution.

After a moment the print man called, "Last week's code, all right."

Shayne pivoted on the ball of his foot and bit out, "You dirty son—!" Then he thought of something and said, "Wait!"

He completed his turn and looked over at the print man. "Perforations match up?"

The other shook his head. "No match."

Shayne looked as if he'd been struck between the eyes. Then he stood staring up at the clean sea sky, using the front of his mind for a screen to visualize again the envelope that had contained the letter he got from Wilma. The stamp now—the stamp?

His fingers snapped like a pistol shot. "*I've* got the matching stamp myself! But who'd have believed it?"

"What?" Glenn growled sullenly.

"That she'd commit suicide just so you got blamed for her murder!"

Shayne watched Lieutenant Edwards and his men toting the corpse through the sands to the morgue wagon. "Of course, she knew the jig was up and what you told her hurried her."

Glenn said frankly, "I'm not crying. But I hate to have the estate get the notes she left on Alma."

"And other good people in Ocean Cay," Shayne said. "Tell you what—I owe you something. I almost had you arrested for the murder of Wilma Cord. I'm going to ask my good friend Bob Edwards to deputize you and me to search Alma's effects. It's the least I can do!"

Shayne lit a cigarette, offered one to Glenn Platt, and grinned wryly. "Lieutenant Edwards can't help it if he picked up a bunch of thieving deputies, can he?"

My Best False Friend

Johnny, the Edge, that most engaging of hustlers, lives up to his Main Stem reputation—it's the boxing racket this time—in his liveliest, sucker-clipping frolic so far.

by LEW LIPTON

I ASKED THE guy who trained my new protege, "How did my boy do today, Spike?"

"Fine, Mr. Webb," he replied. "I had him box 'Bull' Brown and 'Kid' Martin four rousing rounds each."

"Good! Where's the Sailor now?" I inquired.

"I haven't the least idea Mr. Webb. Someone phoned him and he dashed out on the double."

"A dame?"

Spike shrugged and grinned. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"You know, Spike, he's a good-looking kid and all the broads go for him in a big way and vice versa. That's what worries me because I can make him the champ of his division if he gives them the brush. But I'll be damned if I do

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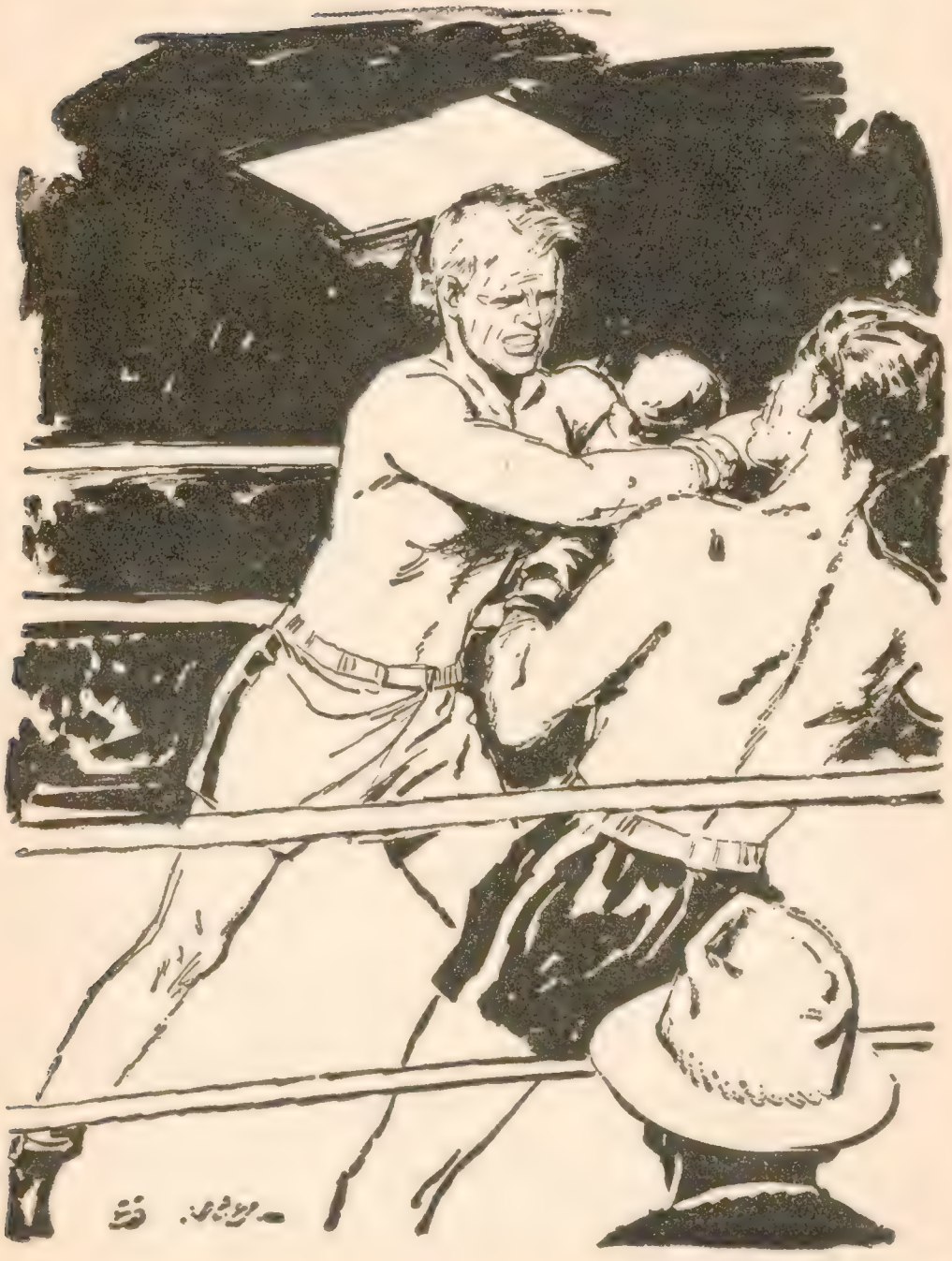


if he keeps going for dolls the way he does. He's clever and can hit, so I don't want any of them slowing up his footwork or weakening him. It isn't cricket!"

"Don't blame you, Mr. Webb," Spike said.

"Think I'll have to talk to him again, Spike, so when you see him please page me at the club or phone my room." I started away.

"Sure will," he called after me.

The above conversation took place in a local gymnasium on Market Street in San Francisco. I, "Johnny, The Edge," who was christened John Webster but switched my last monicker for fear I might accidentally besmirch my family's good name through my hustling proclivities.

I had scored big through a Canadian Copper stock racket via 'boiler-room' work so came to San Francisco for two reasons; one to take a well-earned rest, and the other to have a head start in case of a bad beef which I anticipated when the clipped suckers discovered that I had never given them an even break, which was strictly against my code of ethics. I always wanted and took—the edge. In fact that's how I received my tag from the experienced sharpshooters.

Upon my arrival in San Francisco, I happened to accidentally bump into "Eddie, the Vest," the famous 'short-card' player and cold-deck artist whom I had hustled with often around the Middle West. Eddie, who spent more dough on a rabbit hunt than a rich man spends on a round-the-world honeymoon, received his nickname because of the eye-stopping vests he always wore both in Winter and Summer.

He was in the chips too, having just clipped an amateur for a lot of loot via gin rummy. Then he, too, took it on the lam to the spot made famous by the Golden Gate, to avoid the beef. Through some connection he received a guest card with all privileges to the exclusive Golden Pacific Club and invited me over to join him. Then through another gimmick he secured one for me, too. So I also moved in—bag and baggage!

This all happened before I met the handsome young 'Sailor' Cleary, an ex-gob who was an amateur fighter in the club with ambition to make pro fighting his career. Sailor was very popular with all the male members of the club and also with the visiting females who made quite a fuss over the Adonis-like athlete. I realized it so it was quite a problem. Nevertheless I, too, liked the kid so took him under my wing to manage.

"Where were you today, Sailor?" I asked the ex-gob when he contacted me. "I mean, after you dashed out of the gym."

"Visiting an old shipmate who

just arrived in town," he replied. I knew he was lying.

"A Wave?" I inquired. He shook his head in the negative and grinned sheepishly.

"As I've told you before, Sailor if you just listen to me, I'll make you welter-weight champ and we'll score big. So don't sell me short or try to fool me—your manager. First, I'll match you with a string of pro set-ups that you can knock out over a telephone. Now, how about it?"

"How about what?"

"Will you cut out going with those stale broads who are hard to get, unless—you ask them?"

"I swear I will, Boss," he assured and raised his right hand.

"Then shake to seal the bargain. I hope you mean every word of it."

His grip made me wince a little. I said, "Now tomorrow I'm going to watch you work out at the gym because I've got you lined up for the semi-final next Friday night."

"Great," he gasped. "Who am I gonna fight?"

"A good tough kid from the East named 'Sunny' Norfolk. You'll be on TV too, so you'd better work hard and keep in shape."

"I will, Boss," he assured me, then departed. As soon as he was gone I phoned our trainer, Spike O'Connell.

"I just had another talk with the Sailor," I informed him.

"What did he say?" inquired Spike.

"He took an oath on the man upstairs that he'd behave himself."

"Good!"

"But Spike, he's promised me before and I've cased him as such a liar that I wouldn't believe him if he said, 'Hello'!" Spike laughed. I continued, "On the level, I'm positive that he's more interested in navel engagements than he is in boxing engagements—unless I'm too subtle."

Spike laughed again and replied, "Not at all, Mr. W., I get what you mean."

"Okay, Spike, now here's one thing I want you to do, pal."

"What is it?"

"In fact two things. Both are important so listen good!"

"I'm listening."

"You know the Sailor thinks his left is weak and he figures he can't knock out an opponent with it. I think differently and want to build up his confidence so that he will use it more often. Get me?"

"Yes, Mr. W."

"So, have whoever he's going to box tomorrow do a tank job and dive the second he gets hit with the Sailor's left. But remember, I don't want the Sailor to know it."

"Good idea, Mr. W. I'll give his boxing partners the instructions, on the Q. T."

"That's the idea, Spike. Now number 'two' is, I want you to dig

around and find out who the referee and Judges are, who will handle the fight Friday night. Let me know as soon as you can so I can try and get the Sailor an edge. Got that too?"

"You bet, Boss. I'll call you back as soon as I get the information you want."

"Thanks, Spike, I'll make it worth your while."

"You don't have to tell me that, Mr. W."

"Okay then, so long, Spike."

"Goodbye. Call you later." We both hung up.

THEY SAY THAT "the Lord hates a coward" and that is why I always took a chance and met the two dignified looking Judges in a secluded part of the city in a not too popular Italian bistro where none of us would be recognized. I selected a booth in the rear of the place where we would not be overheard.

Briefly, and to the point I unfolded my plan and ambition to help the Sailor become a "main-eventer" and pressed a couple of coarse notes in the palm of each one declaring that all I desired was "the edge" in case of a close decision.

The dough did the trick and the larcenous old angle manipulators departed, full of spaghetti and half plastered with the numerous switched drinks I had treated them to.

After I had that rigged and confirmed I met the appointed referee in a Chinese gin mill. I knew at a gander that he was too dumb to pick a Derby in a hat store and wasn't tough to reach, so I propositioned him, too. He was a man of a few thousand words—and whenever he spoke—which was often—it sounded like a TV Commercial.

Finally, he asked for "an advance" to seal the bargain, so I palmed him a cash convincer which pleased him no end. Another free-loader like the Judges, he, too, left stiff as a board, but happy.

Being a well-seasoned main-eventer in New York and Chicago, it was only natural that Sunny Norfolk, the colored lad, entered the ring a 3 to 4/1 favorite, so I quickly hustled around and got a gob down on the Gob. Enough in fact to not alone win sufficient to even up the ice I had given the Referee and Judges but also enough to defray the expenses of Sunny, his manager and retinue of handlers as well.

Fact of the matter is, I got Sunny and his manager down too at odds of four to one. The only other person I had tipped off to bet was my pal Eddie the Vest, who was leaving the following day for a deal in Australia. He, too, bet a bundle on the underdog.

Sunny's boxing exhibition was a beaut. A real gasser! The very

fast and clever colored lad who was a carbon copy of Benny Leonard in his prime, had the finesse to make the far less clever Sailor look like—a Champ! The fact of the matter is that if the bout was on the level, the Sailor couldn't have hit him in the prat with a bull fiddle!

Sunny pretended he was hurt several times and in the ninth round, took a left hook to the chin, dropped to one knee, shook his head as if groggy and to clear it then took a count of eight. What an actor!

The house was in an uproar! Pandemonium broke loose! The only one who wasn't in on "the fix" was the Sailor who began to believe his press notices and thought he was a real marvel.

In the last round the Sailor did a fancy Dan boxing routine jabbing the paid target silly. Returning to his corner Sunny spotted me at ringside and winked ever so slyly. It spoke volumes.

I gave him the okay nod of approval, fully aware that the black demon could have flattened my boy with one punch anytime he wanted to, but instead and according to our understanding, he did the 'swan' for me.

Later when I paid off he said, "You know, Mr. Webb, the only reason that I like money is because it soothes my nerves." Then he grinned from ear-to-ear which proved that the unmarked pug had a keen sense of humor, besides phenomenal ability.

"Defiant in defeat, humble in victory," I declared later in the dressing room of the fight arena where the Sailor was holding court. "That has always been my motto Sailor, so don't show-off and act so cocky. It doesn't become a coming Champ."

"Says you!" cracked the Sailor whose sudden transition was astounding. "Just keep getting me fights."

He had plenty of brass and was "putting it on" for a couple of his tarts who had witnessed the fight and although prohibited, entered his dressing room to embrace and congratulate him. Although I nearly blew up, and had difficulty in simmering down, I said nothing and just dummied up. It's sometimes the best way.

I did keep getting him bouts, and "fixing" them with not alone the Judges and referees but also with his opponents or their managers, so in no time flat he rapidly became a main-event drawing card.

Of course greasing the palms of a few second-string sports writers also helped because they kept hailing him as the coming champ and clamored for a big fight to prove it. Still the only one who wasn't in on the know that he always got the edge through me was the Sailor, who not alone took himself seriously but began to

round up a harem, many of whom looked like Benda masks.

Like many other handsome young guys his taste was all in mouth. With each fight and win he became more egotistical, arrogant, brassy and more difficult to handle.

But I was doing all right in a financial way as his manager so swallowed my pride and let his insults and sarcasm roll off my knife. I sensed he was seeking to start a rhubarb, so I never peeped, and only laughed when he made nasty cracks to me in front of his broads. Inwardly I was steaming and down deep in my heart knew I could deck the parleyed bum with one punch even tho I was much lighter. Instead I just played dumb.

Encouraged by his last win and for no reason at all he picked on me again and cracked, *"You're* the kind who starts a fight and then holds my coat while I do all the punching."

Naturally, all the broads laughed or giggled, but I remained silent. Further encouraged by my refusal to argue he said, "What have you got to say about *that* crack, Mr. Manager?"

I smiled and answered, "I pass." I started to leave but he stopped me and exclaimed, "You forget that I am an able bodied seaman and a real clever guy besides."

That was the breaking point so I snarled, "I could tell you're a Sailor by the art work all over your body. But as far as being clever—you couldn't box a compass, you poor creep."

He was too stunned to reply. By the time he had figured it out I had gone.

Instead of arguing with the brassy Sailor who had quickly become my best false friend, I did a Strange Interlude and sought solace in the fact that "Time wounds all heels," and let it go at that but Spike the trainer was so incensed he cracked, "He talks about nothing and can't even explain it."

Unaware that we were getting along like Cain and Abel, the second-string Coast sports writers who were still on my payroll and getting their "ready" every week from me had continued to ballyhoo the Sailor so much in their columns that it was only natural that a match for the welter-weight title was made.

The fight was to take place in the East. An open air affair with a flat guarantee of 100,000 bucks plus a healthy cut of the TV rights. To insure the gate, the fight on TV was blacked out for a radius of one hundred miles, a move not unusual. Furthermore, it was to be shown in Eastern motion picture theatres at five bucks per seat.

Naturally, the Sailor was on cloud nine and whenever he'd see me he'd give me the "brick-layers farewell," or crack sarcastically.

Nifties like, "Hey Boss, do me a favor, please and don't do me a favor."

It was invariably in front of one of his dolls. By now I was convinced that the man in the white cap would come and throw a net over him someday, so I played smart and gave him the silent treatment for after all I was getting mine and my contract with him was as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar.

THE CHAMPIONSHIP fight had every seat taken. It was a complete sell-out. Ringsides sold for 100 a pop then scaled down to general admission which was 7.50 per copy. Only standing room was left. Seats at picture houses where the television was to be shown were at a premium.

Naturally, I had to perform my duties so hustled around, made the right connections to meet the Judges and referee, who happened to be last minute substitutes, then drew out enough folding money from the bank to pay off in advance.

The only deal I could make with his opponent, Al "Knock-Out" White of Boston, was to sign an agreement for a return bout within the next ninety days, which is customary and not unusual. Only then would Al White who was a two-to-one favorite, and his manager agree to do business with me.

I also had it framed with the second-string sports writers and ring-appointed doctor to issue a statement after the fight to the effect that Al "Knock-Out" White had been a victim of virus but insisted upon appearing because he didn't want to disappoint his many loyal fans who came from Boston expressly to see him.

As in every other fight he ever had, the Sailor was in the dark regarding the numerous deals I had negotiated to insure him of winning the Championship. In other words he had a great head but only for a shampoo.

The fight itself was a dandy. And so was Al "Knock-Out" White. He was class personified and moved around like a ballet dancer. His aim and punches were deadly and in the clinches he worked like a machine gun. Aware that he was damaging the Sailor in the mid-section, Al stepped back, became a target and would bow into many a blow that he could have blocked or easily warded.

Every time he permitted the Sailor to take the play away from him the sucker crowd rose en-masse, waved their arms wildly, and shrieked for the ex-Gob to knock him out.

By now I had learned that it takes great histronic ability to fake a fight especially in front of twenty thousand cash customers. But Al White, the knock-out genius, gave a performance that

would have put the mighty Barrymore to shame. He even went to the canvas a couple of times to insure the Sailor of winning. He really should have gotten an Oscar. Naturally the underdog won it, but unanimously.

After the fight, the Sailor's dressing room was crowded again, with chorus girls predominating. Naturally, sports writers from all over the country who came to cover the fight were also among those present. After coughing in the huge bankroll I had just won, I requested silence and then and there declared myself.

"Listen Sailor," I began, "I might as well tell you, cold turkey, that when it comes to dames, you have more brass than the Navy. But when it comes to class you're just a bum—a creep, a big lug, so now that I've made you Champion get another manager who can stomach you and your lousy insults. I'm through. Goodbye!"

That was my Declaration of Independence, after which I hurriedly exited and slammed the door after me.

As per agreement calling for a return bout of fifteen rounds, ninety days later, the Sailor fought Al "Knock-Out" White again without the edge and was all but massacred! In fact he was on the canvas so much they called him Rembrandt. His nose and ribs were broken and his mouth and eyes so badly slashed that it took thirty stitches to sew his face together again.

That's what happened to the arrogant bum who had the first legitimate fight of his entire career. In brief, he was knocked cold after just two Commercials. Still the guy with the edge—I won another large bundle of lettuce, betting against the bum.

Needless to add, the Sailor hung up his gloves and never fought again. For my personal satisfaction, I remained to gander his last fight, after which I cabled Eddie, the Vest in Australia and assured him that I would be only too happy to join him in his new business venture as quickly as I could get my reservation on a Pan-American Airliner.

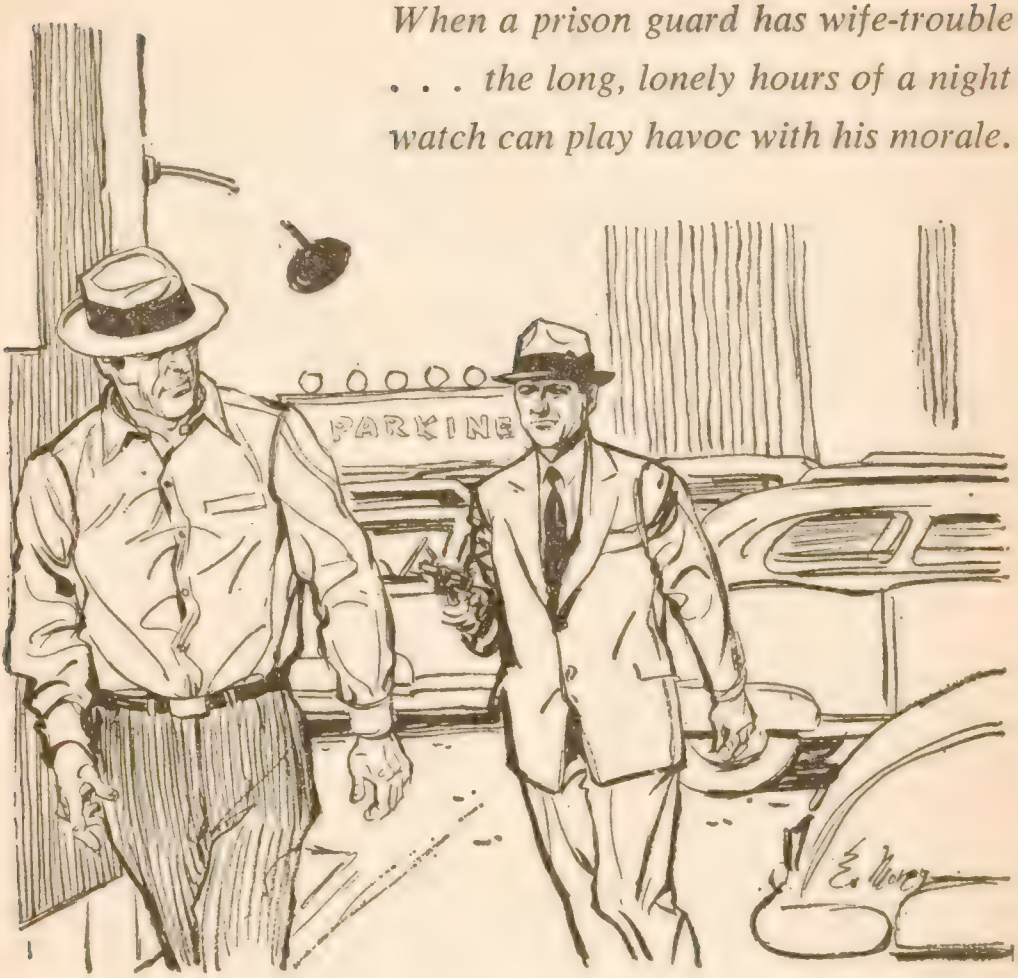
"MARGIN OF TERROR"

by Brett Halliday

The New Mike Shayne Story for Next Month

Night Duty

When a prison guard has wife-trouble . . . the long, lonely hours of a night watch can play havoc with his morale.



by MARTIN SUTO

WHEN THOMPSON reported for night duty, Maginnis, who was night captain in charge of the block, saw his hangdog look and made a remark about some guards not getting the proper nourishment. Earl Thompson snapped back fast about flunkies in charge pushing the help around. He had never discussed his home life with

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Maginnis but he had an idea that Maginnis with his pessimistic view of women imagined the worst about his wife, Thelma.

"It's a great union we got here," Earl sneered.

"Orders," said Maginnis tersely, pretending to study the roster. "I don't assign shifts any more than you do."

He avoided Earl's bitter glance and retracted his round head into his rounded shoulders like a turtle. His creased, heavy-jowled face was a satisfied pink and there was a bald spot the size of a half-dollar atop his skull.

Earl pushed off without further conversation and checked in at the guards' room to change into his blues. Amos Flaherty, a long drink of water from upstate, was expounding on the psychology of inmates and why it was healthy for them to air their 'beefs'.

While Earl changed clothes Flaherty ran out of air temporarily and another guard named Luchinski with enormous hands and black hair crinkling out of his ears and nostrils brought up the subject of Johnny Amrose.

It was a grim recital.

Amrose had been on Death Row for four years, right up until the night before when the State had finally executed him. He had killed a bank guard when he and two others had held up the Centerville Bank and Trust Company. Centerville was a desert town about fifty miles north of Waterman.

"He was a great one for scuttlebutt," said Flaherty, cutting off a chaw of tobacco. "Had an obsession for it, you might say." Flaherty had about six years to sweat out before retirement. He liked to direct his remarks to Luchinski, who was a kind of foil for his sly humor.

Luchinski slammed shut the door of his locker. He winked at Earl. "Never saw a guy take more pleasure in it."

"Trouble with Amrose," continued Flaherty, "he was just as dangerous with his mouth as he was with them hoss pistols he used to flush out bank presidents." He stared at Luchinski, laughing silently.

Luchinki said, "The last rumor he started might and might not ever reach him."

Flaherty snickered, waiting for another lead. Earl lit up, enjoying the brief bull session. It was the only relaxation that made Waterman bearable. And it took his mind off Thelma.

He was surprised to hear Fred Rowlins disagree suddenly with both Flaherty and Luchinski. Fred was standing by the door, puffing on a cigarette. Usually, he "yessed" Flaherty to death, partly because he liked him and partly because he figured Flaherty was in with the brass.

Fred was still a rookie compara-

tively speaking. He'd been at Waterman only two years. He was a bachelor in his early thirties, tall and knobby in his uniform. He had beetle-brows like a pugilist and a rich, youthful redness to his jowls. He talked endlessly about his bar-hopping, and laughed too much and too often, which was something Earl couldn't fathom.

At first he had been chummy with Fred and had invited him out to the house. Despite his occasional lapses from good manners, Fred was intelligent and pleasant. He brought a little zest with him that was like a tonic for Thelma. But, as Earl suspected, it didn't last and he had stopped inviting Fred to the apartment.

It wasn't exactly Fred's fault. Thelma hadn't meant anything but she had paid Fred a trifle too much attention. Still Fred's eyes had begun to sparkle and Earl realized that it was time to pull in the welcome mat.

Thelma wasn't the most beautiful woman in the world but she had a sharp, wide-lipped attractive face with its own dreamy expression, and a figure which would have been hard to conceal even in a sack. Fred had seemed to take the situation in stride and never once referred to it, although he must have realized the embarrassment it was causing Earl.

As for Thelma she said not a word. She was too busy, perhaps, running back and forth to her sister Dot's place.

Fred Rowlins had dowsed his cigarette in a can of water and was asking him whether he thought Amrose had lied or not on his way to the death chamber regarding the existence of the bank loot. If he hadn't, then Werner, his confederate, who had gotten off with a life term, was aware of its location. The third bank robber, Sampson, had been shot and killed at the time of the robbery.

Earl shrugged. "Every big time operator has a drop somewhere, especially after they hit Waterman. They try to build up prestige even before they get here. Amrose was no exception. He was sizing up Walman. They all do. It's the first step in self-protection."

Walman was the con boss who had a reputation for being tough.

"They say Walman is the tightest since Costa," Flaherty interrupted. "He's tighter than a snake's skin. The cons all say he's working for the house."

Luchinski laughed from his belly.

Flaherty coughed on some juice and his already rheumy eyes watered. "If Amrose left a cache somewhere, the rats will get it. But as I said before, it was just like him to put his pal on the spot. He had a weird sense of humor, that one."

Fred Rowlins was yawning instead of laughing. "Maybe you're

right," he conceded. "Just my theory."

Flaherty grinned tolerantly. "We're all going stir crazy, if you ask me," he grunted, picking at his long nose. "Let's go."

They filed out.

Earl glanced at Fred Rowlins and guessed the tall guard was thinking about a bag of money moldering away in some dark hole. It wasn't the first time he had thought about the same thing.

As soon as he got to Gallery 3 Earl made the rounds, pausing here and there before a cell, marveling at an inmate who almost succeeded in creating the illusion that he inhabited an office, a studio or a study. Each inmate revealed as much or as little as he preferred of his character. Some committed minor infractions of the rules in doing so, but Earl was not one to put them on report. Maginnis could go to hell.

He went by Werner's cell and saw that he and his cellmate, Mason, were asleep. Back in his cubicle he picked up a magazine and stretched his legs. He tried to relax but he was too wound up. He hated the night shift with its breathing, moving silence, and its occasional groan. He thought about Thelma and her impulsive spending, about her sister Dot. He didn't care for Dot. She was too much of a catalyst for Thelma's good.

He thought about Werner again. There was always the possibility that Werner did know of a drop last mentioned by Amrose.

He imagined the hundreds of places where Amrose and Werner could have hidden the money—a railroad station, a hotel, a motel, a roominghouse, a summer camp, a vacant lot. So many places.

His thoughts returned to his early days as a rookie. He hadn't been married long at the time and Thelma had still been hungry for the night life. She had seemed more alive then, more vital.

His heart banged against his ribs and he stood up suddenly. He did a knee bend or two, stretching his arms high. When you felt the way he did now a little callisthenics went a long way.

On his second tour at three a.m. he stood close to Werner's cell and stared at the convict's skinny frame in the lower bunk. Werner had his hatchet face close to the wall and was snoring in a low key. Mason was lying on his stomach, his arms hanging like hams over the side. These two kept their cell completely unornamented. The bare prison furnishings failed completely to reveal their personalities.

For some vague reason Earl walked on dissatisfied. Maybe Flaherty had touched a nerve when he had said they were all going stir crazy. He thought about Thelma again, bored, looking at television. Once she had told him

cynically that working at Waterman was only a step removed from being an inmate. The pay was no better than the morale, the hours were long, and there were no coffee breaks since the bloody uprising of a year ago.

He fell asleep and when he woke up with a start he found himself sweating profusely. He had been dreaming again of that day eight years ago when he had been on duty in the machine shop and Silvers, a trustee, had made a break. Later they had found Silvers in the river. At that time there had been the same scuttlebutt about Silvers having bank loot hidden in a drop somewhere.

The next night Earl's car developed ignition trouble and he got Fred Rowlins on the phone in the nick of time. Fred said he had been just about to leave for work. Earl had hesitated to call Fred but there was no one close by. Rowlins lived in a roominghouse near the river about a ten minute drive from Earl's walkup apartment.

Thelma went into her sociable routine when Fred walked in but she didn't overdo it, and Earl breathed easier. Fred looked serious for a moment, then just grinned and let her chatter slide over his shoulder. Thelma and Fred were about the same age, in their early thirties. Earl was conscious of the fact that he was in his forties and feeling like a man standing on the edge of a cliff.

It struck him again that Fred Rowlins wasn't a bad looking fellow, and he wondered what the man was doing at Waterman. He was relieved when Thelma excused herself. But they didn't have a minute to lose and left immediately. He was surprised but not unhappy when he realized that Thelma hadn't invited Fred for dinner the following night.

On the way to Waterman, following the river to the outskirts, they talked about the usual things until Fred brought up the subject of the bank loot and Amrose and Werner. Fred seemed to have the subject on the brain, so Earl decided to let him talk himself out. On his own hook he was figuring ways and means of getting back on the day shift until the younger man turned and spoke to him.

They were leaving the turnpike and heading for the wooded area where the great dun-colored pile of Waterman seemed to rise up out of the river itself. Earl looked at him questioningly.

"I said that Waterman's an outmoded plant," Fred grimaced. "There must be a hundred and one ways of escape. My theory is that Werner will find a way to make a break."

Earl was thoughtful for a moment.

Rowlins laughed. There was a discordant note in the sound that bothered Earl.

Irritated, Fred said: "Any lifer

might try a break sooner or later. It doesn't prove a thing, except that he wants out bad enough to take a chance on getting killed or getting the hole. There's not much choice between the two. The fact is, though, most lifers don't make a break."

Rowlins nodded, and was silent for a moment. "Well . . . you could be right. It was just my theory. Maybe Flaherty's correct about Amrose and his idea of a joke."

"If any of us paid attention to every scuttlebutt that comes our way we'd really be psycho. You can take it from me—if there's any money lying around somewhere Werner's not the boy who'll enjoy it. If he so much as sneezes he's in isolation."

Directly ahead the river receded abruptly and the entrance to Waterman loomed up in the harsh glare of centrally-controlled lamps. A sultry breeze blew in with the odor of weeds and muck and an abrupt change from evening to night.

"What's to prevent him from kiting the word outside and letting a friend do the finding?" said Fred. He seemed intent on exploring every facet of the problem.

Earl felt his stomach muscles knot. The other's complacency seemed to grate on his nerves more than it usually did. He shook his head. "Haven't given it much thought," he said gruffly.

Rowlins said blandly: "Well, I've got an idea about that, too. I'll ask you another. Did you ever take a good look at Werner?"

Earl squirmed. "What about him?" he asked, almost sharply. What gem of wisdom did the other have for him now, he wondered.

Rowlins grinned. "I've studied his face, and believe you me, if any man ever took seriously the old saying, 'you for me and me for me' it's old Augustus Werner. That fellow's an escape artist right down to his soles."

Earl nodded at the check-out guard as they rolled through. With relief he said, "Let's check in."

Rowlins parked the car smoothly in the lot behind the Administration building and they doubled back to C Building to check in with Maginnis. When they waved in past the guard they found Maginnis thumbing through a magazine. He grunted sourly and told them the coffee break had been re-established.

"Big deal," said Earl. "How long's this night duty gonna last? Doesn't seniority mean anything around here?"

Maginnis grunted again and pulled his head in further, while Rowlins checked the bulletin board. Maginnis was staring avidly at a model-of-the-month photo of a starlet wearing a bikini and bending over to touch her toes.

Maginnis was bending right along with her without moving

anything but his eyeballs. Across the corridor Flaherty and two guards from another block were entering the messhall for coffee.

Rowlins grabbed Earl by the arm and said, "Take a look at this. Werner's in the hospital."

Earl glanced at the listing and sure enough he saw that Augustus Werner was on the sick sheet.

"What happened to Werner?" he asked Maginnis, ignoring Rowlins' silly grin of triumph.

"Huh?" said Maginnis blankly. "Oh! Werner pulled a muscle in his arm—no, leg. Three-thirty this p.m., in the machine shop." He wound it up rapidly and went back to his bathing beauty.

Earl thinned his lips at Maginnis' bowed head and balled his fist. Rowlins grinned as they went out to the messhall.

"What do you think of my theory now?" he asked.

Earl grunted. "I wouldn't put anything past an inmate like Werner. He probably can throw his knee or shoulder out of joint anytime at all. On the other hand people sprain their ankles every day in the week, inside Waterman and out."

"Sure," said Rowlins, trying hard to keep from bubbling over. "But even so—"

Earl looked away. Rowlins could irritate him without half trying. It was typical of most rookies to imagine that every inmate was planning a break. They joined Flaherty and the others before taking their posts.

A WEEK LATER Werner was back in his cell.

Earl was champing at the bit hoping to be re-assigned to day duty. He pestered Maginnis until the guard captain threatened to report him for insubordination. Earl put a damper on his tongue but burned inwardly.

He was stunned one night when Fred Rowlins failed to report in and Flaherty informed him casually that he had heard Rowlins was back on day duty in the machine shop. He didn't bother to confront Maginnis. Maginnis pulled considerable weight, but he didn't have the last say.

Fred was too experienced to keep after the guard captain blindly. There was nothing he could do except be patient. Night duty was like Siberia. You were there and you didn't know how long you would be there. Especially if you didn't fit with the powers that be.

As the nights crawled by agonizingly slow he began to simmer down. His own appraisal of Werner had reached a peculiar deadend. From his observations of Werner after many nights the inmate did nothing but sleep. In fact, he couldn't remember when he had last seen Werner awake.

A few days later Werner made his break.

Earl caught the broadcast at home. He began to explain to Thelma about Fred Rowlins and his theory. He hadn't bothered to mention it before. Thelma nodded and dropped a coffee spoon as she sat on the daybed.

"Hey!" He laughed when she spilled cream from the service pitcher.

"I'm all thumbs today," she said, and laughed shrilly. What was it about people, he thought, that could so often make their laughter seem grating and unnatural. Her paleness also surprised him and he found himself wondering if she had changed the shade of her face powder.

When he reported in he got part of the story from Maginnis and the rest from Flaherty and the others in the messhall. Werner had made his break in the machine shop and gotten away in the electrician's truck, which had been in for some major wiring repairs.

Sections of high voltage wiring had to be replaced. While the electrician was working, a beef got under way among the inmates, and in the confusion Werner had jammed a gun into the electrician's back and ordered him into the truck. From that point on, as Flaherty put it, Werner had the upper hand.

All afternoon there'd been shakedowns, and promises of more that night. Mason, Werner's cellmate, was on the griddle, but he had nothing to say except that Werner had kept his plans to himself.

Warden Grimes was in a nasty mood and making things uncomfortable for personnel and inmates alike. In the meantime, the manhunt was on for the escapee along the river, in the woods, and along the roads and highway leading into town.

Earl had to admit that Fred Rowlins had guessed right about Werner. But as the night wore on he hadn't much time to think about Rowlins. There were more shakedowns than you could count, and anybody outside the walls would have been amazed at the stuff the inmates had managed to hide or smuggle in.

Before he realized it he was outside Waterman on his way home in his own car. He cruised along, sucking on a cigarette and watching the river water change from silver to deep blue in the morning sunlight. The weather was going to be hot and humid. Already his skin was crawling with goose pimples.

He parked his sedan behind the apartment building and went up in the automatic elevator. Thelma wasn't home. He unlaced his shoes and wandered into the kitchen. Usually at ten in the morning she was still asleep. She had probably gone out for cigarettes.

He drank a glass of cold milk and fell asleep on the daybed.

When he woke up it was five in the afternoon. Thelma hadn't come back.

He showered and shaved and made a light meal.

He decided to call her sister.

Dot's careless voice became guarded when she discovered who was calling. She said that earlier she and Thelma had lunched together. Thelma had left for home early in the afternoon. She had no idea where she might be. He said it was all right and hung up with a frown.

He snapped on the radio and waited for the news. They were still looking for Werner. Either he was hiding in the woods or along the river. If he was in the city he didn't have much of a chance to escape unnoticed. Waterman was a sizeable city but not that metropolitan.

For some reason he decided to call Fred. When he dialled there was no answer. A bachelor like Fred was either taking his time getting home or he was already making the rounds in town.

He went down to his car.

He drove slowly into the main drag, having no very clear purpose in mind. His chances of finding her seemed remote. He stopped off at the first lounge he saw. It had a shabby front with yellow neon lights and a series of red ones forming a slipper.

He went into a dim interior and sat at a long elliptically-shaped bar. While he drank a beer he studied the customers, who were all run-of-the-mill. He had the feeling that his life had come full circle. There were a half dozen hostesses doubling as waitresses. They ignored him for the time being.

He tried a dozen other cafes and bars, with the same disappointing result.

He decided suddenly to report in sick. Maginnis would make some crack but he had more on his mind tonight. He was calling from a public phone booth propped against the side of a pawn shop when he saw Fred Rowlins emerge from the sea grille across the street.

There was a woman on his arm. It was Thelma. Fred was whispering, it seemed, in her ear and Thelma was nodding. The blue and red neon lights from the grille bathed the two of them in a weird marine glow. A huge red lobster with enormous claws seemed about to embrace them in a pincer movement.

He had sufficient presence of mind to open the phone booth door, cutting off the light above his head. If they had glanced his way they could hardly have failed to recognize him. He waited until they moved up the sidewalk and turned into Main. When he reached the corner he caught them as they entered Olin's Lounge. Olin's was pretty swanky. Right

up Fred Rowlin's alley, he thought humorlessly.

There was nothing further he could do, or wanted to do at the moment. He had been afraid of something like this for some time. He hesitated for an instant on the corner. The heat was stifling. People walked along like zombies. They could do with a little rain, he thought.

On his side of the street was a bar facing Olin's. He went in and ordered a beer. He kept his eyes glued to the entrance across the street. He looked at the timepiece over the bar. It was eight forty-five.

He glanced at the TV set facing the room only once or twice. He kept his eyes fastened to Olin's entrance. At ten forty-five with traffic thinning out he saw Werner peer into the bar momentarily, then walk on rapidly.

Fred sat glued to the bar stool for a second or two longer, making his decision. Somewhere between here and Waterman Werner had picked up a pair of dark pants and a white shirt. His narrow face with its high, sweaty cheekbones hadn't had the look of a hunted man. He resembled more a man bewildered by his own boldness in walking down Main Street in plain view of everyone.

Actually, he could have had only one purpose in taking such a chance. He had to have a car to get out of Waterman. Once on the highway he could always ditch the car and take his chances with sucker traffic. There were more ways than one to skin a cat.

Outside, glancing down the block for the escapee's retreating back, Earl remembered that Werner was armed and dangerous. He wouldn't hesitate to use the weapon if it came to a showdown. The night air was as stiflingly hot as a blast furnace after the cool interior of the bar.

He glanced at Olin's only in passing, and then he saw Werner. He was already a block away hugging the store fronts, but walking along casually like a man taking a stroll before turning in for the night. Earl started down. He had taken only a half dozen steps when Werner looked back.

Earl kept his stride. He had no way of knowing whether Werner had recognized him or not, for the escapee continued on as before. Between them were only a handful of people, a couple walking arm in arm doing a little window-shopping, and a skid-row character weaving carefully along the curb and around hydrants.

There was no doubt that Werner was looking for a car. At any moment, Earl guessed, he would take a side street and try his luck.

He wasn't mistaken.

At the corner of Somerset and Main, only one intersection before the next traffic light system, Werner disappeared abruptly. Appar-

ently he had seen the neat white marker above the street plaque with the arrow and the legend: *Municipal Parking Lot.*

At least two hundred cars stood in neat metallic rows behind the theater and the store fronts, flanked on one side by the tall gray building of the Methodist church, and on the other by the Waterman Federal and Savings Bank with its own little parking lot. As far down as the registry building the cars stood massed.

Pale blue lights atop their metal poles illuminated the area. Earl stood in the shadows at the rear of a barber shop and looked for Werner. Despite the lights he had to strain his eyes to pick him out of the shadows thrown by the numerous vehicles.

Werner was moving methodically in the very center of the parked cars. He conducted his search expertly and silently, no more than a thin white line when he did move, and a wraith when he was motionless against the hood of a car.

Earl began to stalk him, taking pains but knowing he would have to hurry. If Werner were lucky enough to find a car with keys in the ignition, courtesy of some forgetful owner, his next move would be swift.

Werner had found the right car for him—a late model green sedan—and was bending over the wheel when Earl came up behind him. He had no way of knowing which way the odds lay when Earl ordered him to stay put and keep his hands on the wheel.

With one hand, as if to convince Werner his other held a gun, Earl pulled a snub-nosed pistol from the other's back pocket. "Step down," he ordered. "Careful now."

Werner turned slowly. When he saw Earl he made a long face. "Sure is a small world," he said in a low disgusted voice.

"And getting smaller every day," said Earl, thinking of Fred Rowlins and Thelma at Olin's. "Move along to the street and don't try anything sudden. I got a lot on my mind tonight."

Werner sensed his mood and walked carefully ahead. He was talking to himself. As they emerged from the lot a couple entered and glanced at them curiously. When they were out of earshot Werner growled softly: "Don't you believe in scuttlebutt, Thompson? Or are you one of those kind who believe in seeing before believing?"

Earl grunted scornfully.

"Tell me you're ready to lead me to the drop. Tell me there's fifty thousand at least where you and Amrose last cached it. You guys never give up, do you?"

But his pulse beat faster when the other hesitated.

"It was worth a try," said Werner, and laughed. "So I made the deal with Rowlins instead. So what?"

The laugh reminded Earl of Fred Rowlins.

"Shut up and keep moving," he said.

He marched Werner up Somerset and across Main without seeing a cop, and down Spencer past the sea grille where he had first seen Fred that night. His own car was parked a bit further on from the pawnshop and the public telephone booth. He gestured Werner toward it in tight-lipped silence.

A police cruiser went by rapidly going east as he ordered Werner to get behind the wheel. He climbed in the rear and poked the .38 against Werner's spine.

Werner was staring after the police car. "What gives?" he said hopefully, twisting around to look at Earl.

"We'll drive up to Main," said Earl patiently. "We'll park this side of Olin's. When you see Fred Rowlins come out, follow him. When you get a chance, when he's crossing the street to get into his car—"

"I'm laughin'," said Werner but he wasn't. He started up the car and drove up to Main.

At that moment Earl saw Thelma and Fred come out of Olin's. His hands felt numb. He wasn't sure who would have the last laugh after all. He remembered Thelma saying that being a guard at Waterman was only one step away from being an inmate.

Mike Shayne Presents

Next Issue's Headliners

MARGIN FOR TERROR by BRETT HALLIDAY

The New Mike Shayne Thriller

THE BODY ON THE BED by FRANK STRUAN

A Short Novel of Unbearable Suspense

A CASE OF THE JIMJAMS by FULTON T. GRANT

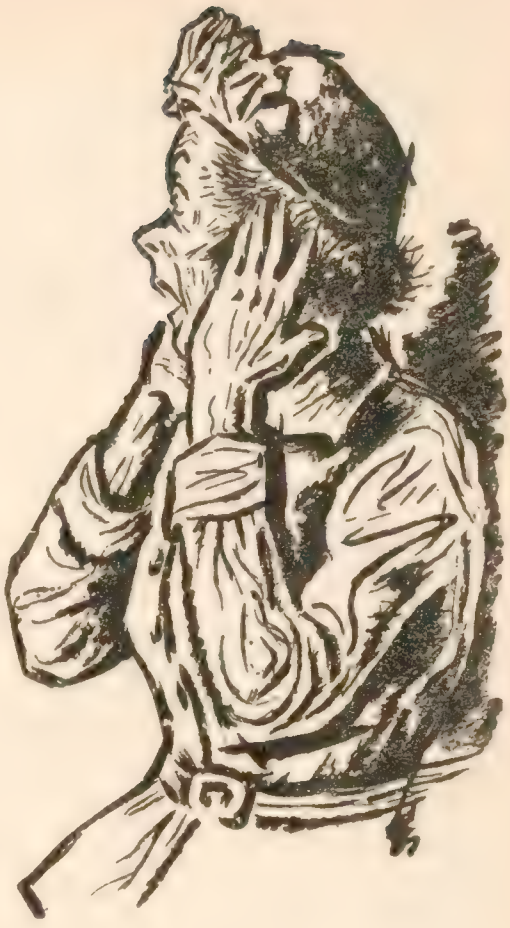
LOBSTER FOR A CRAZY CAT by T. C. McCLARY

ART FOR MURDER'S SAKE by PETER KENNEDY

An exceptionally fine crime-suspense yarn.

DUST to DUST

by AUBREY CASH



THE CAMELOT HOTEL was less public than its name would indicate, once you became acquainted with it. In sober fact, most of its residents—all of whom were women—had lived there in comparatively exclusive isolation for many years.

Sybilla Wentworthy, for instance, found it hard to imagine what it would be like to live anywhere else. But that is what she had to consider after the police had removed the body of Emily Carter.

"None of us could possibly stay on now," affirmed Rose Ellison vigorously. Sybilla winced slightly, for Rose was nothing if not robust and had an astonishingly loud voice.

"It's absolutely ruined my day," Rose continued. The fact that she was middle-aged ("and proud of it. If you took some exercise occasionally, Sybilla, your indiges-

tion would disappear like magic") did not prevent her weekly assault on various parts of the Home Counties.

Early this morning Rose had set off with sandwiches and a cane for a rocky formation in Sussex, and during the evening meal last night Sybilla had learned more about red sandstone outcrops in Sussex than she cared to know.

"It isn't that I mind myself, but my family are such snobs," Rose went on, and Sybilla stoutly resisted a temptation to suggest that Rose must be by far the biggest. Luckily the conversation came to a sudden halt, for Mrs. de Rome entered the lounge wiping her eyes.

The various women sitting about began to concentrate furiously on less depressing topics, but a sense of strain was apparent. After all, a suicide is not such a frequent occurrence in one of the more respectable hotels in Kensington. More or less unanimously the various women had come to the conclusion that it would be best to look for alternative accommodation. Small annoyances one could put up with, but a suicide—

The proprietress, Mrs. de Rome, sat down in one of her beautifully upholstered Third Empire chairs, and started to cry, much to the disgust of Rose, who sniffed and declared she was going out for a beer.

Sybilla felt great compassion, and wandered over to the distraught woman. "Never mind, my dear," she comforted. "It was hardly your fault."

"But why did she have to do it?" wailed Mrs. de Rome.

It certainly seemed rather an untidy way to end a life that had been devoted to the scrupulous pursuit of beauty. Poor Emily Carter had been found curled up next to the gas-fire in her room, dressed in her hand-embroidered Chinese kimono and wearing her gloves.

It was only fitting, Sybilla mused, that Emily should have decided to wear her kimono in which to die, and gloves to protect her from the sordid contact with the gas range.

Emily was celebrated for her fastidiousness and it was well known that her own impeccable taste had much to do with her late husband's success in the field of antique china. Small wonder that she had choen to live here, after his death, for Mrs. de Rome's choice of furniture was of the finest. There had been money in the family once.

At 9:30 p. m. Mrs. de Rome made a half-hearted suggestion that coffee would be made for anyone who desired it.

"I'll have a cup, my dear," Sybilla said warmly, and she followed the proprietress down to the kitchen and sat there with her. The cook and the maid had long gone to bed.

They drank out of the red-and-gold Crown Derby cups that Emily

had cherished and their conversation consisted mainly of reminiscences of the dead woman supplied by Mrs. de Rome—with much use of a tiny handkerchief—and numerous attempts at consolation from Sybilla which invariably began with, "Never mind, my dear."

At 10:15 they heard the front door close with a bang, and Sybilla guessed that Rose Ellison had returned from the local. Conversation had virtually dried up and going to bed seemed the only sensible thing to do.

Walking slowly up the wide, handsomely carpeted stairway Sybilla began to speculate on Mrs. de Rome's as yet unanswered question—"Why did she do it?" There seemed no reason at all. Emily had money and was content to live at this place. She had friends and relations whom she saw regularly.

Sybilla felt an intense curiosity to see the dead woman's room. The police, of course, had locked the door and taken away the key. But they did not know that, over the years of friendly intercourse, Sybilla and Emily had discovered that their keys were interchangeable.

Feeling rather like a female Sherlock Holmes, Sybilla extracted her key from her bag and walked softly to a door almost facing that of her room. The hall night light was dimly burning, and the carefully placed occasional tables and Venetian candelabra cast weird shadows on to the four walls.

As quietly as she could, she turned the key, and the scene of death was before her. The police had left the window slightly opened, and the heavy velvet curtains moved in the night breeze. Sybilla was, by now, both excited and frightened. She turned on the light by the bed.

The bed was spotless, but Emily's little bedside table was at an untidy angle. If the dead woman had been alive, Sybilla speculated, the table would not be in its present position. With a quiet, devout movement, she shifted it back, and then looked towards the black lacquered gas-fire.

It was a small fire, and the smokey black-lead had been lacquered, for it was mainly ornamental. Mrs. de Rome had installed central heating, and gas was used only in winter. The supply pipe had been discreetly boxed in and some six feet up a master tap could be reached by opening a diminutive flap.

This was now open, and Sybilla realized at last precisely the actions Emily Carter had performed prior to her death, for a wondefully ornamented Regency chair stood under the little flap.

Now, with the weather warm, the gas had been turned off. Emily had to stand on that chair, turn on

the gas from the master tap, and then again from the fire.

Sybilla imagined the look of resignation on Emily's face as she had curled up on the floor, by the fire, with the gas escaping. In no other hotel could such a death occur without further preparations. The door would have to be sealed, and possibly a loose window. Mrs. de Rome, with her houseproudness, had made it so much easier for Emily to die.

Now Sybilla's excitement calmed down, and she felt sadness, regret and a great tiredness. Someone she knew and liked existed no longer. She sat down on the chair and suddenly realized that she must get out of this room. If the police discovered her activity here, she might get into serious trouble.

She got up from the chair and instinctively smoothed her skirt. There was a feeling of dryness on her hand—perhaps she should rub in some cold cream tonight. She looked at her hand and quickly back at the seat of the chair.

As quickly as it had arrived, so her tiredness disappeared, for a small piece of unwelcome knowledge entered her mind. Someone else had been in this room. Now Sybilla knew exactly why it had seemed so wrong for Emily to have chosen to die by such a method.

She must tell the police immediately, but she must take care. What she had to say, if true, was also a matter of life and death.

Quickly she left the room, closed the door, and made for the stairs, but before she had taken one step down she realized that someone had turned off the hall light.

Fearfully, she looked behind and saw the figure advance towards her, but before Rose Ellison could get her strong fingers round her throat, Sybilla Wentworthy's screams would have awakened the dead.

Habit prevails. By the time the last reporter had finished with the Camelot Hotel, most of its residents had discovered that they did not want to go after all. The case ran for some weeks, and Rose Ellison, that pillar of bluff respectability, was in a mental state which would ensure her immunity from execution.

The one slip in Emily Carter's life, small but sufficient to put her entirely in the power of Rose, was hushed up to all but one or two of her close friends, and they didn't care.

It was just a pity that Emily had not decided years earlier to go to the police instead of leaving it for so long. Perhaps, before her relationship with Rose had not been so firm in its pattern of blackmailer and blackmailed, she would have escaped with her life. No one, however, can be sure of that.

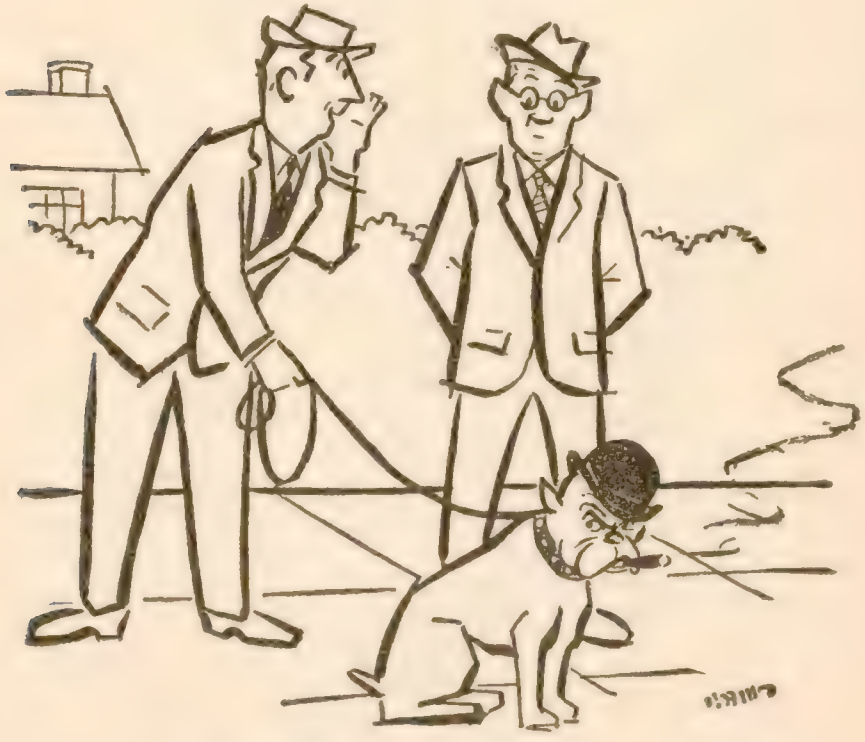
"If only Rose hadn't bored me stiff with that lecture on red sand-

stone," Sybilla afterwards explained to Mrs. de Rome. "I'd never have connected the color of the dust on that chair with anything at all.

"Emily must have fainted, of course, when she realized that Rose intended to murder her, which was very helpful because all Rose had to do was to turn on the gas taps, using Emily's gloves or something, and then slide the gloves on Emily's hands. Otherwise she'd probably have tried to strangle the poor woman like she almost did to me."

She shuddered.

"In any case," Sybilla concluded, "even if I hadn't listened to all that business about sandstone I'd still have been worried, because how on earth could anyone with Emily's love of beautiful things take it upon herself to stand on a chair like that, and with dusty shoes as well . . ."



"He thinks he's a police dog—plain clothes!"

THE
Ed. Morey

SCARLET BOX

Peter Quentin's mystery stories have about them a sensitive perceptiveness which makes them superior to most yarns in the slain blonde beauty category. But there's never a stinting of high-voltage suspense.

A MURDER MYSTERY IN SPRING TOURIST ROME

by PETER QUENTIN

ROBERT MILLER first saw the girl in the Piazza di Spagna. He was on his way to his final portrait session with Andy Prussing, and he noticed her beyond the little boat-fountain, pausing at one of the flower stalls at the foot of the Spanish Steps.

It was early in the year for the tourist invasion of Rome, but she was American as dogwood—young, very blonde, with that cool self-assurance which is so conspicuous in Italy. He could paint her like that, he thought, beside the great piles of iris and stock with her bright hair in such vivid contrast to the dark heads around her. The picture should be called: *The Spring Tourist, Number One.*

He forgot her then and, dodging through the tangled traffic, strolled toward the Corso, a tall, rangy figure looking more like a college

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athlete than one of the most respected young artists in Rome.

As he passed a corner newspaper kiosk, the headlines were screaming out the news of Andy Prussing's engagement to Betsy Thorne. *Il Romanzo del Secolo!* He read the exuberant Italian and grinned. Perhaps Andy's engagement to one of the biggest box-office stars in Hollywood *was* The Romance of the Century. Who could tell whether or not those human dynamos had emotions? But the Romance, coming after a string of flop movies, had certainly chosen a convenient moment to blossom.

Andy Prussing had been smart when he had beaten all the competition and persuaded Betsy Thorne to make her first independent appearance in the picture he and Kate Reynolds were filming here. But now, by falling in love with his star, he had pulled the coup of the century.

Five years in Europe had given Robert an amused, almost affectionate attitude toward the cult of success at all cost. Yes, Andy Prussing had what it takes. *Roman Romance* would now get a million dollars' worth of free advance publicity and the Wonder-Director was headed back to the top of the heap.

Robert Miller had crossed the Corso and was moving through a tiny sun-drenched square when he saw the yellow-haired girl again. She walked right past him, swinging her pocketbook, glancing around her nonchalantly, as if Rome had been built especially for her entertainment. She paused ahead of him and, ignoring a baroque façade, gazed through the cavernous entrance of a workmen's *trattoria.*

There was nothing about the humble little restaurant to interest a tourist. That and the coincidence of her second appearance seemed slightly odd. Robert turned into the spiderweb of alleys which veered and twisted toward the Piazza Navona.

A few moments later, when he glanced over his shoulder, the girl was still behind him.

It was highly improbable that she should be following him. He wasn't a movie celebrity like Betsy Thorne, to be recognized by an autograph hunter. And yet . . . Half amused, half intrigued, he ducked down an alley and slipped into a doorway.

At this hour of siesta the street was almost noiseless except for the desultory shouts of playing children and the wheeze of a distant barrel organ. He waited. Nothing happened and he began to feel rather foolish. Then he heard the click of high heels and, peering out, saw the girl hurrying around the corner.

She stood in the middle of the cobbled street, glancing uncertainly to left and right. After a

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ROBERT MILLER *An Artist*

EMILY LAYDEN
An unemployed actress

ANDY PRUSSING
A movie producer

KATE REYNOLDS
His assistant

BETSY THORNE
A Hollywood star

GABRIELLA CELARE
An Italian princess

DUCA di BRABANTO
Her father

MARCHESE di MARCHIATTI *Her fiancé*

ANTONELLI *Chief of Police*

LUIGI FAGLIONE *A beggar*

moment she came, almost running, in his direction.

When she reached the doorway he stepped out directly in front of her. "Were you looking for me?" he asked.

She stopped dead in her tracks. She was even better-looking than he had thought. But there was another quality he hadn't expected—a strained brightness, as if her nervous energy were almost burned up.

"I'm sorry," she said. "This seemed like a brilliant idea, Mr. Miller, but—"

"How do you know my name?"

"I read about you yesterday in the *Rome American News*. There was a photograph and your address. It said you went every afternoon to Andy Prussing's apartment to paint his portrait. I thought if I followed from your studio . . ."

She broke off with a sudden smile. "Well Miss Gumshoe of Rome, Italy, doesn't seem to be my role, does it? Good-by, Mr. Miller. Sorry to have complicated your afternoon."

She started away from him down the street. She was some yards off when she stumbled. It happened so quickly that almost before Robert realized it she had crumpled onto the pavement. He ran to her side.

"It's all right." Her face, turned up to his, was white and drawn, rejecting any assistance. She got

up and, moving to a house wall, leaned against it.

He had seen that vague, far-away look in the eyes of beggar children on the streets. Suddenly he understood what was the matter with her.

"You're hungry. That's the trouble, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is. I—"

"I'll buy you something to eat."

"No, no. You'll think I did it on purpose."

"Food first. Motives later."

They were close to the Piazza Navona. He helped her across the huge, lozenge-shaped area to a outdoor café. There, at a table under a blue-and-white umbrella, he ordered her coffee and a ham sandwich, and watched while she ate in silent concentration.

Yes, he thought, it was a beautiful face—classic spacing of features, skin with some of the golden quality of the Roman air. Just to look at her gave him an absurd pleasure. He ordered her another ham sandwich on long Italian bread.

When she had finished it he said, "So you're tracking Andy Prussing?"

"That's right. He keeps the address of that apartment secret as the H-bomb formula. I've been to the office. I even tried to get to Kate Reynolds. No soap."

"What do you want him for?"

Her clear blue eyes watched him over her empty coffee glass. "The same old story. I'm an actress. I've been living in Paris earning a few francs subbing English dialogue on French movies. A couple of weeks ago I met Andy Prussing there at a party. He promised me a bit in the Betsy Thorne picture. Just come, he said. Everything would be arranged. The moment I scraped together enough cash for the fare, I came. Now, of course, no one's ever heard of me. They'll get in touch, they say. The usual brush-off. It's been going on for two days."

She collected her pocketbook. "But I have an aversion to girls who pick men up and swamp them with sob-stories. Thanks a lot, Mr. Miller. You've been very kind. Now I'll be getting along."

She rose and started away from the table. The thought of her walking out of his life like that, with his chance of meeting her again dim, was suddenly intolerable to him.

"Hey, wait!" he called impulsively. "I'll take you to Andy."

She turned back in front of the Bernini River-Fountain, extravagantly small and modern against the huge Renaissance nudes.

"I've nothing to do at the sitting. I finished the portrait yesterday. I'm just going to make sure it's the way I want it." He called to the waiter, put money on the table for the check, and joined her. "The great Andy Prussing

promised you a job. We're going to see that you get it."

For a moment she hesitated. Then she gave a quick smile of gratitude that brought him a ludicrous sense of happiness. "Heavens above," he thought, "am I going to fall in love with this girl?"

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"Emily. Emily Layden."

As he took her arm he could feel her skin through the thin white sleeve of her blouse. "Yes," he thought, "it's happening. Robert Miller, bachelor, of twenty-eight years' standing, is going to fall in love with a girl called Emily Layden."

The quiet of early afternoon was still on Rome. When they reached the Teatro di Marcello, where Andy lived, the wide avenue in front of it was deserted except for a small boy sitting on a fallen column practicing on an accordion.

Emily studied the great colonnaded façade. "So this is it. It looks like something out of *Ben Hur*."

"It is. It's an arena Julius Caesar started. The Orsini family built on behind and fixed it into a palace in the sixteenth century. Andy's sublet an apartment from a friend. Great splendor—naturally."

They skirted the huge semicircle of stone and, climbing steps, reached the iron gates which led to the palace gardens. Fat lavender wistaria blossoms hung over ancient walls. From behind trailed the carefree Neapolitan strains of the accordion. The solitary beggar with a wooden leg, who sat there every afternoon, squatted against the garden wall, basking in the sun.

"Beggars bring good luck."

Robert tossed some coins into the man's battered hat and guided Emily across the gardens to the staircase which led to Andy's apartment.

At its foot Emily paused, looking awkward. "I hate to ask this, after you've been so kind. But if I could see him alone—just for a few minutes . . ." She broke off, a flush spreading over her cheeks.

Robert felt depressed, but he realized he was being unreasonable. He had no right to adopt a possessive attitude.

"All right. But I'll have to take you up. Andry throws all the servants out in the afternoon. He says they make him nervous. He only lets in people to whom he's given special, individual knocks."

They climbed the broad staircase and reached the carved door which led to Andy's apartment. Robert gave five brisk raps. Within a few moments the door opened and Andy, big, pink-faced, overpowering as a bulldozer, stood on the threshold. He was carrying a scarlet leather box under his arm. He looked excited, even more dy-

namic than usual. His teeth flashed.

"Hi, Robert, boy! Look; the portrait's gone. I decided it was fine the way it was. Had it crated this morning and sent around to Betsy with a plea for the forgiveness of all past sins and a passionate hope for future bliss."

He saw Emily Layden then. For a second the smile died, leaving his face almost pudding-stupid. Then it switched on again in full force. "Well, well, look who's here! Of all people!"

Emily wasn't smiling. "Hello, Andy."

Andy turned back to Robert: "Listen, Robert, boy. Leave me alone with this lovely little lady a while, will you? But come back. I want to write a check for that picture, apart from anything else. Make it twenty minutes—no, half an hour. I'm expecting someone else, too. This seems to be housecleaning day."

His big hand took hold of Emily's arm. "Come on in, baby. Well, what d'you know! I'll check with my horoscope. Taurus must be deep in Saturn or something equally momentous."

He waved at Robert. "See you, Robert, boy."

The door closed behind them.

II

FOR HALF AN HOUR Robert Miller walked along the banks of the sluggish Tiber, watching the leisurely fishermen, the darting rowing skiffs. The pleasure which his meeting with Emily had brought was tempered now by an admixture of doubt. Andy hadn't greeted her as if she were a small-time actress who'd come job-hunting. Could her pathetic hard-luck story have been a hoax? The moment his watch hands pointed to three o'clock he hurried back to the Palazzo Orsini.

The one-legged beggar was still sunning himself by the gate. There was no sign of anyone else. Robert crossed to the staircase and climbed it. To his surprise, Andy's door was ajar. He rapped his code knock. There was no reply. He rapped again. After a third failure he pushed the door inward and, passing through the dark, tapestried foyer, moved into the sun-drenched salon.

No one was there. The afternoon sunlight, splashing across the rented splendor of brocaded couches, great mirrors, Renaissance pictures, and velvet hangings, seeed to add an ominous quality to the emptiness.

"Andy," he called.

His voice echoed and died away. He took a step forward, and then came to an abrupt halt.

On the carpet in front of him, grotesquely jackknifed around the end of a couch, lay the motionless figure of Andy Prussing. Blood was trickling from a gun-wound in his forehead.

For a moment Robert stood in shocked astonishment, then he dropped to his knees and, picking up one of the large wrists, felt for a pulse. But as he did so he realized it was a waste of time. For a man who had landed in the first wave at Anzio, there was no mistaking death.

Andy Prussing, the Wonder-Director, the hero of the Romance of the Century, was dead—shot through the head by a bullet.

Faintly through the open window, Robert could hear the lilt of the boy's accordion in the courtyard below. From a confusion of warring emotions the thought of Emily Layden leaped to his mind. Was this why she had looked so intently alert when Andy had asked to see her alone?

Absurdly, stubbornly, he rebelled against the obvious.

To keep himself steady he started to search for a gun. There wasn't one. Then Andy couldn't have committed suicide. Robert looked down at the body, forcing himself to think logically. Andy had said he had been expecting someone else. Couldn't that someone else have come after Emily had gone and—? The sophistry collapsed under him. He felt cold and bleak. It was hopeless to try not to believe something just because he didn't want to believe it.

Emily Layden must have done it. Emily Layden must have murdered Prussing.

Behind him, in the eerie silence, he heard a rustle. He turned. One of the velvet hangings was swaying slightly. He ran to it and swung it back.

A girl was crouched against the wall. But it wasn't Emily Layden. It was a girl he had never seen—almost a child, small, with black Italian hair and great brown eyes which watched him unwaveringly.

As he saw her, elation seized Robert. So the "someone else" had arrived, after all.

The girl was clutching a large black pocketbook. Without speaking, Robert took it from her and opened it. There was no gun inside. He handed it back to her.

In rapid, accented English, she exclaimed, "I did not do it! Please, whoever you are, you must believe me."

"How long have you been here?"

"Just a moment. A second."

"Was anyone else here when you arrived?"

"No. No one else. The door is open. I come in. I—I see Andy lying there. I hear someone coming. It is you. I run to hide."

"Was Andy expecting you?"

"Yes, yes. I telephone. He say to come."

"Who are you, anyway?"

In spite of its fragility and fear the girl's face assumed an expression of childish arrogance. "I am Gabriella Celare. Principessa Celare. The daughter of the Duca di Brabanto."

Robert, like everyone in Rome, knew of the Duca di Brabanto. He was an important minister in the government, the head of one of the oldest, wealthiest families in Italy.

"Oh, now you see." The girl's small hand clutched at his sleeve. "Antonelli, the Chief of the Police —he is the biggest enemy of my father. He would do anything—anything, to ruin him. If they found me here—the scandal . . . Oh, please, please, you must believe me and help me."

Even in her pleading there was an element of hauteur. This was no longer a frightened girl. This was a young Borgia demanding assistance from a court retainer. She couldn't have been more than seventeen. In the circumstances, it was rather touching.

Robert watched her noncommittally. "You'd better explain what you're doing here."

"Oh, of course. I explain everything."

The Principessa's gaze, shifting from his, fell on Andy Prussing. She gave an exclamation of distaste and moved to the other end of the salon. Robert followed. She turned to him.

"The story—you will say it is foolishness, young girl's foolishness. It is a question of letters."

"Letters?"

"Letters that I wrote to Andy. Oh, I must get them back. My fiancé, he is come to Rome. In three weeks we are married. If he was to know, if my father . . ."

The brown eyes were gazing at him in naïve solemnity. "Must I tell it all to you—what I do? Are not there many, many girls who do the same? I meet Andy at a party. He is so charming, so important from Hollywood. I fall a little in love. I come here once for tea. I come again and again—always secretly to deceive my father, who is so old-fashioned, so prig. And then, when I am separate from him, I write the letters."

She pushed the tumbling black hair back from her shoulders. "Oh, they are letters of love, foolish to have written, but I was completely infatuated. I know now it was not love. When I meet my fiancé, the

man my father has arranged for me to marry, I know real love and it is quite different. When I have come to my senses I ask Andy to return my letters, but he refuse. He wants them as a memento. Then when I read in the newspaper that Andy is affianced with this Betsy Thorne, I am so glad, so happy for him. Today I telephone. I say, 'Congratulations for the engagement.' Also I say, 'Please, I must have my letters now.' And Andy says, 'Sure, sure, baby. You come at three and pick them up. They'll all be ready for you tied in a pink ribbon bow.' "

She nodded vigorously. "That is what he says and that is why I come. And please, please, I do not know why he is dead. I know nothing. Only I know that I must get the letters."

Once again her hand, small and insistent, moved to his arm. "You see now why you must help me? What happens if the letters are found here now by Antonelli? It is the ruin of my father in his career, the ruin of my marriage with my fiancé, who is so old-family, so strict. And me, who am innocent . . . !"

She broke off, glancing at him with a confidence in his sympathy that was almost shameless. "You help me find the letters, yes? I know where they are. Always he keeps them in a scarlet box of leather. His pretty keepsafe, he calls it. You help me find the letters? And then you let me take them and go away?"

Robert listened to her rush of words with a chill of despondency. He would have settled for anyone other than Emily as the murderer of Andy Prussing. But it was difficult to suspect this pretty, solemn child-princess. Andy had said he was expecting a visitor and he had come to the door with a scarlet box under his arm. He had talked, too, about its being "house-cleaning day." That certainly sounded as if her story was true, as if Andy had been intending to give the letters back to her.

He was sure that this determined girl had enough spirit to have shot Andy without hesitation if he had threatened to hold the letters over her head. But why should he have done that? Engaged as he was to Betsy Thorne, the publication of his clandestine romance with the Principessa would have been as damaging to him as to her.

No, there was no getting around it. The absence of a gun, the timing, Andy's greeting at the door, all pointed remorselessly back to Emily Layden.

The Principessa Celare was standing very straight, her lips half parted, watching him expectantly. If she were innocent, as he thought she was, he would be a heel to turn her in to the police, to wreck her marriage and her father's political career.

"All right," he said resignedly; "let's look for that box."

Her face broke into a radiant smile. "You mean that? Oh, you are kind. Some men would have acted harshly, without understanding—"

It wasn't hard to find the box. A drawer in Andy's desk was locked. Robert pried it open, and the scarlet leather box was inside.

The Principessa snatched it from him. She tried its little gold lock, but it did not yield.

"Oh, they are locked inside. They—"

She broke off as a loud double rat-tat sounded behind them on the front door. She whirled around to Robert, clutching the box, her eyes bright with panic.

"The door, it is open, yes? They will come right in. I go? Through the back entrance in the kitchen? Please, please, I go now?"

Almost before he had nodded his assent, she had turned, with the box under her arm, and was hurrying through a rear door out of the salon. A woman's voice called "Andy" from the hall.

Robert moved forward, so that he was standing between the body and the entrance from the foyer.

A couple of seconds after the princess had disappeared, Kate Reynolds hurried into the room.

Robert had known Kate Reynolds for some time and liked her. A shrewd Midwestern career woman from Michigan, she had beaten her way up in Hollywood from script-girl to screen writer to her present bitterly won position as the writer and associate director of *Roman Romance*. When she saw Robert she gave her broad, almost ribald grin.

"Hi, Robert, where's the Maestro? You heard the great news, I guess. He thinks he can get us permission to shoot the first sequence of *Romance* at the Castello Marchiatti. Most historical, exclusive joint in Calabria. If he wangles it, it'll be the deal of the century."

She threw herself into a large chair and kicked off her shoes. "My feet are killing me. I've been out to Tivoli with Betsy. We ogled the fountains, and the peasants ogled her."

She looked up, in the act of lighting a cigarette, and her alert eyes narrowed. "Hey, what's the matter with you? You're green as Gorgonzola."

It had all happened too quickly for him to have made a plan. There was a telephone on the desk. He stepped toward it, revealing the body on the carpet.

Kate Reynolds shot out of the chair, took a pace forward, and then stopped, throwing a hand out to support herself on a chair-back.

"Andy!" Her slightly underslung lower jaw sagged open. "For heaven's sake, what's the matter with him?"

"He's dead. Somebody's shot him." . . . *Emily. Emily Layden.*

. . . "I just this moment found him. I'm going to call the police."

Kate Reynolds dropped back into the chair. Her face was puckered up like a prune. Its obvious suffering touched him. He crossed to her and put his hand on her shoulder. She had tugged a handkerchief from her pocketbook and was jabbing viciously with it at her nose.

"But—but it can't have happened! The fool, the poor fool!" Her stricken eyes sought his. "What's going to happen to the movie now?"

He knew what that meant to her. *Roman Romance* had been her whole life, her big chance to arrive. Now it was as dead as Andy Prussing.

Slowly Kate got up from the chair. "You—you just found him?"

"That's right."

"But who could have done it? And why? Did you see anyone?"

"No." The word slipped out before he realized it.

Surprised, almost shocked at himself, he thought, "Am I going to be this crazy? Am I going to protect a murderess?"

Kate came to him and gripped his arm. "We should call the police." She looked close to hysteria.

"Take it easy, Kate," he said, and he put an arm around her shoulders.

He picked up the phone and said in Italian, "Get me the police. Quickly."

III

THE POLICE CAME in less than twenty minutes. It was an impressive array, headed by Antonelli, the Chief of Police, himself. Instantly the atmosphere of an international incident was established. Officials poured in from the American Embassy. The apartment was swarming with excited, excitable detectives.

It was Antonelli who cross-questioned Robert. The political enemy of the Duca de Brabanto was a formidable man, tall, with liquid, almost feminine black eyes and a voice that was deceptively soft.

Robert was astonished at his own skill in lying, as astonished by it as by his irresponsible decision to shield two girls, one of whom was almost certainly guilty.

The interview was absurdly simple. He was a well-known artist, a respected foreign resident. It was common knowledge that he came daily to work on the portrait and, since his relationship with Andy had been strictly impersonal, there was no reasons to suspect him.

Just before six, after a character voucher from the Embassy representatives, he was asked politely to stand by for further questioning and then released. Kate Reynolds, as Andy's business associate, was still being interrogated, so he left the apartment alone.

As he emerged into the fading

evening light he felt as if a new, quite alien personality had taken possession of him. But the new personality knew exactly what it wanted. Somehow, he would have to find Emily Layden. She would have some sort of explanation. She had to have one. He must find her, and ask if he could help her.

The beggar with the wooden leg who had been squatting by the garden gate was gone, but from the courtyard in front of the palace Robert could still hear the monotonous lament of the boy's accordion. He crossed to the Monte Savello trolley stop and took a car homeward.

When the trolley stopped at the Piazza San Silvestro he got off and walked to the Via Babuino. When he reached the house where his apartment-studio was situated he went on up the stairs. He opened the door to the workroom, and stopped short.

Emily Layden was sitting on the couch.

When she saw him she got up. "Hello. The door was unlocked, so I came in. I hope you don't mind."

He stood looking at her, remembering with stupid irrelevance that he had lost the door key a few days ago and had meant to ask the janitress to have a new one made.

"I know it's brash to barge in like this." Incredibly, she was smiling as if she hadn't a care in the world. "But I had to explain. You see, I lied to you about Andy. There didn't seem any point in telling the truth to a stranger. But—well, you were so kind. I decided I wouldn't be happy until I'd confessed. Besides, I want to pay you back for those sandwiches."

She felt in her pocketbook and, producing a thousand-lira note, held it out to him. "Please, take

it." The smile moved to her blue eyes. "Don't worry. I *was* hungry. That wasn't an act. But I've eaten an enormous meal now. I got money from Andy. I don't have any compunction about accepting it from him."

Robert took the note automatically and sat down on the arm of the couch.

"Please," she said anxiously. "You will let me explain, won't you? It won't take long. I *am* an actress, a very unsuccessful one, and I have been living in Paris. All that was true. But I didn't come here because Andy had offered me a job in his movie. I came because he's my ex-brother-in-law."

"Your brother-in-law?" echoed Robert dully.

"Years ago, when he was still a second-string Broadway director, before he went to Hollywood, he married my sister. It was quite a disastrous marriage. There were other women almost from the beginning. Although she was pregnant, Margaret went to Reno within the year and divorced him. At that time he didn't have much money, but she refused alimony anyway. After Chris was born she went to work. She's been working ever since. Even when Andy became famous she flatly refused to ask him for a penny. And, heaven knows, he never offered any of his own accord."

She shrugged. "I thought she was crazy, of course, but there was nothing I could do with her. Then, a couple of days ago, she wrote me in Paris that Chris, her son, had developed a spinal disease. He's going to have to lie on his back for two years. There are sanitariums, of course. But not in Margaret's income bracket.

"The very same day I read in the paper about Andy's engagement to Betsy Thorne. I guess I saw red. I was fed up with Margaret's stubbornness, fed up with Andy's irresponsibility. Andy could darn' well pay for Chris's illness and he and Margaret could both of them darn' well like it. I scooped the pennies out of my biggy-bank and came roaring to Rome."

She paused, still smiling at him. "I hadn't figured on Andy being such a VIP, with a secret apartment and a flock of secretaries to protect him from predatory females. I told them at the office that I was his sister-in-law, but I guess they hear that story every hour on the hour. By the time I met you I was near the end of my rope. But, thanks to you, everything's fine. The moment I got to Andy, he crashed through. He was pretty nice about it, too. He wrote me a check for Chris and even insisted on giving me enough money to get back to Paris."

She threw out her hands. "So there it is. End of confession. Now, just to prove I'm forgiven, maybe you'll let me buy you a drink and celebrate."

Robert looked at her, fighting back hope. He mustn't allow it to come. Not yet. He said, "All this is true?"

"True? Why shouldn't it be true?"

He got up, hating to do what he would have to do. "Andy's dead."

"Dead!" Although he studied her mercilessly, he could see no other expression on her face than shocked astonishment.

"I went to the apartment after the half-hour was up. I found Andy lying there—shot dead. I've just come from the police."

She sank back onto the couch and sat there in silence, the skin whitening around her cheekbones. Finally, she asked, "And—and you told them about me?"

"No."

She looked up quickly. "Why not?"

"I guess I just didn't. That's all."

"But you thought I'd killed him. Of course you must have."

He nodded. "I suppose I did."

"But I didn't do it. Oh, I've got to make you believe it. He—he was perfectly all right when I left. I never dreamed . . ."

Urgently she felt in her pocketbook and brought out a check. "Look. He gave me this check for Chris. I was going to cash it tomorrow. How could I have killed him? He'd given me what I wanted. I had the check. Now—now that he's dead I won't be able to cash it. It's not worth anything. It—"

Robert took the check. It was dated that day, made out for five thousand dollars payable to Emily Layden, and signed: Andrew J. Prussing. At last Robert let the exhilaration flood through him. Her story must be true. Andy's death ruined all she had been trying to do for her nephew.

She must be innocent.

He gave the check back to her. As she returned it to her pocketbook, he said, "How long did you stay with him?"

"Just about ten minutes, maybe a quarter of an hour."

If the Principessa had been telling the truth about the time of her arrival, that left a full fifteen minutes for someone else to have slipped in after Emily had gone.

"Did he say anything that could give any kind of clue?"

"He said he was expecting someone. You heard him. He said that at the door. And—yes, I do think there's something."

"What?"

"I think someone was already there in the apartment. The first thing he did was to lock that red box in his desk, very cautiously, as if someone might hear him. All the time he seemed eager to get me out of the way. And then, once, I was almot sure I heard someone moving around in the next room."

"But you couldn't be certain?"

"No. Not really." She looked at him bleakly. "What do I have to do now? Go to the police? Oh, I

wouldn't mention you, of course, but if I explained—"

What would happen if she "explained"? He believed she was innocent. But would the police? Mightn't Antonelli, with a big, international sensation on his hands, jump at a convenient suspect once he got hold of one? Even though Emily had the check, they could easily argue that she and Andy had quarreled after Andy had written it and that Andy had threatened to stop payment on it at the bank. If it happened that way, for Emily's sake Robert would then have to turn in the Principessa. He saw an infinite succession of scandals leading everyone into danger.

He asked, "Did anyone see you leave?"

"I don't think so."

"What about the beggar at the gate?"

"I—I'm afraid I didn't notice. I was thinking about Chris, the check—"

"He may have seen us both go in." Robert was thinking rapidly. "But it's a big apartment house and he was only at the garden gates. He couldn't tell which apartment we were headed for. It isn't likely he'll remember us, let alone report us. No, it's best for you to do nothing. With any luck we can get you back to Paris and no one will be the wiser."

The last lingering light of the sunset falling through the window was a rich gold now. She stood directly in its path. Suddenly she asked, "Why are you doing all this for me?"

He smiled. "If they'd thrown you in jail, I'd have had to visit with you through an iron grille. That's not my idea at all."

She flushed slightly. "I might as well admit something, too. I didn't come here just to explain. I came because I wanted to see you again."

She took a half step toward him, and then stopped. For a moment they stood looking at each other. Almost of their own accord, his hands went out and caught her to him. He kissed her on the mouth, and he felt the kind of wonder that came sometimes when he was painting. This couldn't have happened. It was too right, too perfect, down to the smallest detail.

It was then that the knock sounded on the door. They broke apart. Robert nodded automatically toward the bedroom. Emily hurried into it. Robert went to the door and opened it.

Betsy Thorne was standing on the threshold.

"Hello, Mr. Miller. I'm so sorry I'm late. Had you given me up?"

For a second he looked at Betsy in bewilderment. Then he remembered. Yesterday she had called up about having her portrait painted. She had said she'd come around that evening at six-thirty to discuss it.

She walked past him into the

room with that sublime assurance of welcome peculiar to movie stars and royalty. She chose a chair and sat down, loosening her mink coat.

"I know I said six-thirty, Mr. Miller. But I've been out at Tivoli all afternoon and I just couldn't tear myself away."

She was smiling up at him with her white, vivid smile. She had never seemed quite real to Robert. Like Andy Prussing, she was slightly larger than life, as if she were constantly in close-up. There was too much glamour, too much burnished red hair, too much animal vitality.

"Well," she said, "are you going to be grand and temperamental? Or do I get my portrait? After all, you've done one for Andy."

He said awkwardly, "You haven't been back to the hotel yet?"

"No. Why?"

"Then you haven't heard."

"Heard what?"

"I'm afraid something's happened."

She got up sharply. "Not to Andy?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Thorne. I hate to be the one to tell you. He's dead."

He had had no preconceived idea of how she would react. Vaguely he had remembered her as she received bad news in the movies, her lips half parted, her enormous eyes veiled with a mist of tears. But it wasn't that way at all.

Her shoulders sagged. The mink coat slipped in grotesque slow-motion to the floor. Her hand made a clumsy gesture to clutch the back of a chair. Then she collapsed onto the carpet.

Robert stood looking down at her. Then he hurried into the bedroom. Emily got up from the bed.

"It's Betsy Thorne," he said. "I just told her the news. She fainted. I'll have to take her back to her hotel. But stay here. Whatever happens, don't go out. Stay here until I get back."

She nodded gravely. "All right, Robert."

He returned to the studio, brought water from the kitchen, and knelt at Betsy's side. Soon she came around to consciousness. She asked for no further information. Robert wasn't even sure she heard him when he told her he was going to take her back to the hotel. But she walked with him obediently down the stairs and out into the street.

The car which must have brought her from Tivoli was parked at the curb. The Italian driver helped Robert get her into the back seat. As they drove off she sat very stiff, her famous face white as paper.

It's shock, thought Robert. Almost like battle-shock. Had she loved Andy this much, then? Had the Romance of the Century been more than just a publicity stunt dreamed up by press agents?

All the street lights were on now. Soon the car drew up outside the Hotel Excelsior. The driver and Robert helped Betsy into the lobby. Instantly they were surrounded by a swarm of avid, jabbering reporters. Robert managed to beat a way to the elevator and took Betsy up to her suite.

The elevator man opened the door for them with a passkey. Robert had expected a secretary or a maid. But there was no one there. A pile of mail, almost a foot high, stood on a desk, and there was a wooden crate by the wall, Andy's portrait. He guided Betsy into a bedroom crowded with flowers. Without a word she dropped down on the bed, the mink coat flapping out around her.

The phone on the bedside table started to ring. Robert picked it up. A man's voice said, "This is the *Paris News*. I . . ."

"Miss Thorne can't be disturbed."

Robert slammed down the receiver. The phone started to ring again.

He couldn't leave her like this. The press would hound her to death, and the police would be coming, too. Kate Reynolds was the person. She was staying here at the Excelsior. If she had finished with the police . . .

He crossed again to the screaming phone. "Get off the line," he said. The phone went dead. He asked the desk for Miss Reynolds' room. In a moment Kate's gruff voice answered.

"Hello, Kate. This is Robert. I've just brought Betsy back. She's shot to pieces and there's no one to look after her. Can you come over, get her to bed, act watchdog?"

"I guess so. Just got away from the police, myself. Sure. I'll be right over."

When Robert put the receiver down the phone started to ring again. He chased another reporter off the wire and told the desk to stop all calls.

The buzzer sounded. He went to answer it. Kate Reynolds, looking old and exhausted, hurried into the room. "Where is she?"

"In the bedroom."

"Take it hard?"

"Very."

"Poor kid." Kate Reynolds stuck a cigarette in her mouth like a man and lit it from a gold lighter. "The news is all over Rome and the panic has started. One of the Italian backers has called the office to pull out his money. The rest'll start bowing out tomorrow. I guess *Romance* is washed up, all right. By the way, I went through all Andy's papers with the police. They found his will."

"They did?"

"Yeah. He'd been married before. Did you know that? I didn't. Had a kid too—a son. He's left all his property to his son."

Kate puffed cigarette smoke. "Well, at least someone's going to

get something out of all this. . . . Okay, Robert. You run along. I'll take over. The police will be here in a minute. That Antonelli—if I see much more of him I'll have to marry him!"

She clumped off toward the bedroom. Robert stood looking after her unhappily.

Emily's nephew was sole beneficiary under the will! With Andy alive, Emily would have cleared five thousand dollars on the check. But now, with Andy dead, her whole family was going to be rich. Once Antonelli placed her at the scene of the crime she would be as good as convicted.

He must get back to the studio at once, to warn her, to think up some new, safer plan for her protection.

He hurried out of the hotel and past the fashionable evening crowds. He was crossing the Piazza Barberini when a truck swerved around a corner and dropped a bundle of newspapers by a stall. Robert caught the words *Andy Prussing* in the headlines and bought a copy. Standing on the sidewalk, he read the main headline: ANDY PRUSSING MURDERED.

He turned then to the second headline, and his heart missed a beat as he read: BLONDE AMERICAN GIRL, SEEN FLEEING FROM APARTMENT, SOUGHT BY POLICE AS ASSASSIN.

He shifted to the paragraph below. It began with a description of his own discovery of Andy's body. Then it went on:

"Luigi Faglione, a one-legged beggar who habitually sits outside the Palazzo Orsini, has brought a sensational story to the police. This afternoon, just before the time of the murder, he noticed a girl going up to Mr. Prussing's apartment. She seemed nervous and odd, and her behavior aroused the curiosity of the beggar. He waited at the foot of the stairs, and soon the girl came running out again in a condition of confusion and terror. The beggar has given a detailed description of this girl. Almost certainly American, she is about twenty-five, of slight build with dark blue eyes, marked cheekbones, and very brilliant blonde hair. She was wearing a full skirt and a white peasant-style blouse. The entire police force has been alerted to search for her; trains leaving Rome are under close observation . . ."

Robert stopped reading. Things had been bad enough. Now they were disastrous. And this new blow, coming so suddenly out of nowhere, did not even make sense. Emily's appearance had not been "nervous and odd," and the beggar had not seen her "going up to Mr. Prussing's apartment." He had only seen her at the garden gates and he had seen her, not alone, but with Robert.

There was no mention of her being with a man. Nor was there any mention of the Principessa Celare,

who must also have passed through the gates. And how could the beggar, who had seemed half asleep, have given Emily's description with such uncanny accuracy?

But all that mattered was this net which was weaving itself relentlessly around Emily. At this time of year there was not more than a handful of young blonde American girls in Rome. Now Emily would not be able to show herself in the streets without being recognized.

IV

MILLER DROPPED THE paper and started to hurry up the Via Sistina. In less than five minutes he had reached the Via Babuino.

A black limousine was parked outside his front door. As he skirted it a large uniformed chauffeur came up to him, smiling politely.

"*Scusi,* Signor." His Italian was soft and respectful. "You are Signor Robert Miller, the painter, yes?"

"What do you want?"

"Please, Signor, you will be good enough to come with me. The Duca di Brabanto wishes to speak to you on a matter of much importance."

"Tell the Duca I'm busy right now."

Robert started past the chauffeur into the hallway. As he did so, a slight, almost wistful droop came to the man's smile and he produced a revolver from his pocket. Half concealing it beneath the long flap of his uniform coat, he pressed it against Robert's side.

"So many apologies, Signor. But the matter is most urgent. The Duca has instructed me that it cannot be delayed."

Robert glanced down at the revolver. This was a fantastically high-handed thing to do at nine-thirty on a public street. Anger flared up in him; he knocked the gun aside and started towards the stairs.

"Stop, Signor!"

The chauffeur was coming doggedly after him. With sudden anxiety Robert remembered the lost door key. If he went up to the apartment the Duca's henchman would certainly follow. There was no way of preventing his going into the studio, seeing Emily, and recognizing her. Of all the dangers that was the most essential to avert.

Frustrated and angry, he said, "All right. I'll go."

"A thousand thanks, Signor."

The chauffeur bowed. Still holding the revolver, he guided Robert to the limousine and opened the rear door. Then he climbed into the front seat and drove off.

Soon they reached the great Palazzo Brabanto. The chauffeur, extravagantly formal now, conducted Robert to the immense front doorway, where a footman took over and led him across an enclosed patio-garden through an endless succession of tapestried reception-rooms.

Robert knew that the few really rich noble families of Rome, particularly those who took an active part in politics, still wielded a power that was almost feudal. And he realized, of course, that this shameless kidnapping must be in some way connected with the Principessa Celare. But now that all his thoughts were centered on Emily, his commitments to protect the Princess from her irate father seemed unimportant.

They reached a heavily scrolled door. The footman opened it. "Signor Miller," he announced.

He stood aside for Robert to pass him into the room and closed the door behind him.

In front of deep-red hangings, a very small, exquisitely dressed man was seated behind a huge Venetian desk. As soon as Robert entered he rose and came toward him. Robert was confronted with bright black eyes gazing from the clever, intricate face of a fifteenth-century politician at the court of the Medici.

"Good evening, Mr. Miller." The Duca's English was without accent. A small, delicately shaped hand gestured toward a chair. "Please be seated. It was kind of you to have come so promptly."

Robert did not move. "I came so promptly because there was a gun in my ribs."

"Oh, dear me!" The father of the Principessa Celare smiled sympathetically. "I am afraid that Angelo, the chauffeur, has a flair for the theatrical. I trust he did not alarm you. He will certainly be reprimanded."

"Let's hear what you have to say, Duca. I'm in a hurry."

"Ah, yes. Americans are always in a hurry. It is a national characteristic, is it not? Very well, Mr. Miller. Let us hustle. Have you, by any chance, read the evening newspapers?"

"I have."

"Excellent. In that case, I can come to the point at once." The Duca's smile was a shade less benign. "In Rome, Mr. Miller, one needs many ears, many eyes to remain successful in public life. Since I have only two ears, two eyes, I hire many others. One pair of those ears and eyes belong to the beggar, Luigi Faglione. It was I who sent him to the police. His

story, as you may have observed, is not precisely accurate. It does not, for example, make mention of you. But he has been well paid and I can assure you that he will stand by his story as long as I wish him to do so."

The Duca paused for a reaction, but Robert did not give one. With someone as formidable as this it was wiser, at this stage, at least, merely to listen.

The smile still lingered in the Duca's eyes. "You have, I believe, met my daughter." The little hands went up again. "Oh, there is no need for discretion. I have already had a most interesting talk with Gabriella. I know everything that happened this afternoon and I wish to add my gratitude to hers, for your gallant behavior in helping her retrieve her letters."

He gave a grave bow. Robert bowed back.

"Yes," continued the Duca softly, "although Gabriella did not suspect it, I have known about her little flirtation with Mr. Prussing since its inception. I stationed Luigi Faglione outside the Palazzo Orsini, and each time she went there for one of her secret teas, he made a faithful report."

He paused. "Perhaps you think it is strange in a father not to have nipped that affair in the bud, but Gabriella, Mr. Miller, is all fire, fury, and youthful rebellion. If I had forbidden her to see Mr. Prussing she might well have

caused a scandal merely to flout my authority. No, I felt it wiser to let the whole relationship die a natural death."

As he talked, the Duca was pacing warily around Robert, like a bantam boxer gauging the defenses of a heavyweight.

"But while I waited for that natural death, Mr. Miller, I was not idle. I believe in being prepared for all exigencies. Immediately I sent to the United States for information concerning Mr. Prussing's private life. My American ears and eyes were not long in letting me know that Mr. Prussing had a former wife, a young son—and a sister-in-law."

He stopped in front of Robert, gazing at him challengingly. "An actress sister-in-law, Mr. Miller, whose name is Emily Layden. An attractive blond young lady. Most attractive, I can assure you, for my ears and eyes in America, although they were not successful in obtaining a photograph of the wife or the son, had no difficulty in producing, from a Broadway casting agency, a likeness of Emily Layden. Now, Mr. Miller, do you understand why I am so anxious to speak with you?"

So this was his real antagonist, this clever little man with the scuttling, mouselike hands. Robert returned his gaze with equal steadiness. "Am I supposed to understand?"

"Perhaps it will make things plainer if I tell you that I also have ears and eyes in the employ of Andy Prussing. Two days ago I was informed that an Emily Layden had appeared at his office. Another pair of ears and eyes, which work for me at the police bureau, had just let me know that Mr. Prussing's will leaves everything to his son. This afternoon, when Luigi Faglione came to report that Gabriella had been to see Mr. Prussing, I had already been informed of the murder.

"I questioned Faglione about people who could have gone to the apartment. You he knows, because he sees you go there every day. This afternoon he had seen you with a blonde American girl. I showed him the photograph of Emily Layden. He identified it positively. Emily Layden, Mr. Miller, was the girl you took to Mr. Prussing's apartment and left there. Emily Layden is the assassin who murdered Mr. Prussing for his money."

The Duca's face was cold and hard now. "As it happens, relations between myself and the Chief of Police are not cordial, and I have not seen fit to let him know what I know directly. But there are other ways. Luigi Faglione, for example. And one hour ago I sent my ears and eyes from Mr. Prussing's office to report the presence of Emily Layden in Rome. It will not take the police long to fit these two stories together. Then the call

will go out for the arrest of Emily Layden."

The Duca raised his hands and brought them together with a sudden smacking sound.

"Now, Mr. Miller, you must understand. Since you did not mention this Emily Layden to Antonelli, it is obvious that you have some reason for wishing to protect her. It is my intention to convince you that your reason, whatever it may be, is chivalrous folly. I am grateful for your help to Gabriella and I have shown my gratitude by keeping your name from the police. But that is as far as I can go. You cannot afford to protect a murderess. It makes you an accessory after and possibly before the fact. There is only one thing for you to do. You must tell me where to find Emily Layden, so that I can have her turned over to the police at once—this evening, now."

Robert stood looking at him, wondering almost with awe at the change in himself. If, say, yesterday, he had met this little man with his astute agility of mind, his bewilderingly efficient spy system, he would probably have liked him and admired him. Now he was nothing but an enemy of Emily, someone to be distrusted and outwitted.

Coldly, he said, "And what makes you so interested in having this case cleared up? An excess of public spirit?"

The Duca smiled an unexpected, almost flirtatious smile. "On the contrary, Mr. Miller. I am suggesting a move which, I admit, will benefit me just as much as yourself. Consider my situation. I have dozens of enemies only too eager to witness my downfall. Antonelli is not the least of them. If this case is solved instantly, Antonelli will close the investigation. But if it drags on, even for one unnecessary hour, he may learn that Gabriella was at that apartment today. And the moment Antonelli so much as suspects that my daughter . . ."

The Duca came closer. He was standing now on tiptoe, as if, by bringing their two faces nearer to each other, he could forge a cozier relationship between them.

"Not without difficulty, Mr. Miller, I have arranged a marriage between Gabriella and the only son of one of the biggest property holders in Calabria. It is a marriage of great suitability, both socially and politically. And, needless to say, the boy is charming, quite charming enough for Gabriella. But the family is as proud, as conservative as my own. If a breath of scandal were to come out about Gabriella, the wedding would be canceled. Gabriella's future would be blighted. My own political position would be dangerously, perhaps disastrously, imperiled."

His voice was as honeyed now as a courtesan's. "Can you wish all that to happen to me when it is so little I ask of you? I am not an

ungrateful man. Help me and I will help you. Tell me where that girl can be found, and gladly I will commission a wedding portrait of Gabriella and another of her fiancé. Gladly I will recommend your talents to the greatest, the most influential circles in Rome. Think, Mr. Miller. Do you not feel it your duty to avert a scandal which may damage the friendship between your country and mine, to send a murderess where she belongs—into the arms of the police?"

The plea and the bribe had left Robert unmoved, but he was bitingly conscious of the danger. He couldn't just refuse to co-operate. If he did, the Duca would certainly have him followed from the Palazzo and, just as certainly, the follower would discover that Emily was hidden in his apartment. To his surprise, Robert found that his own Machiavellianism, born only a few hours ago, was quite prepared to challenge the Duca's.

There were, he saw, only two courses to take: He could counterthreat to expose the Principessa to Antonelli unless the Duca called off his case against Emily and helped him smuggle her back to Paris, or he could deny all knowledge of Emily's whereabouts.

After a second's deliberation he abandoned the first plan. To make an avowed enemy of someone as influential and enterprising as the Duca was too risky at the moment. His best way was to try to get away with feigned ignorance.

He marshaled a smile as casually bland as one of the Duca's. "I understand your position perfectly now, and I'd like to be able to help. But I'm afraid there's nothing I can do."

"Nothing?" The Duca's black eyes flashed. "What can you possibly mean?"

"I did meet a blonde girl outside the Teatro di Marcello this afternoon, but I hadn't the slightest idea who she was. She came up to me and asked for a light. We chatted a while. She said she was going to visit Andy but she didn't know which his apartment was. I offered to take her up. Since I was early for my sitting, I merely showed her the door and walked off. When I returned, half an hour later, she was gone." He threw out a hand. "I never saw her again."

The Duca's small pink tongue came out to moisten his lower lip. His pose of charming friendliness had quite disappeared. He looked cautious, clever, and very formidable.

"If that is so, Mr. Miller, why did you not report the episode to Antonelli?"

Robert's shrug was disarming. "Since I was trying to protect your daughter, I thought it was sensible for me to have as little to do with the police as possible. Antonelli struck me as a clever guy. By mentioning the blonde, I'd have be-

come an important witness. There'd have been a lot of interrogations. I was afraid that . . ."

He let the end of the sentence ride. The Principessa's father had got his meaning, all right. He could tell that from the irritated pucker between the ducal eyebrows.

For a moment they stood looking at each other in a no-man's land between friendship and hostility. Then the door opened. The Principessa Celare entered on the arm of a tall, dark young man with a clipped military mustache. Her candid child's gaze moved from her father to Robert without the faintest sign of recognition or alarm.

"Oh, excuse us, Papa. We did not know you were entertaining."

The Duca gave his stiff bow. "Gabriella, this is Mr. Miller, one of the most distinguished young American artists in Rome. I am hoping he may be good enough to paint your wedding portrait."

He turned to Robert: "Mr. Miller, this is my daughter, the Principessa Celare and her fiancé, the Marchese di Marchiatti."

The Princess smiled graciously. The young man bowed.

As Robert returned their salutations, he felt a sudden spurt of excitement. The name of the Principessa's fiancé from Calabria was Marchiatti. Kate Reynolds had said that Andy had thought he could wangle permission to shoot the first sequence of *Roman Romance* in the Castello Marchiatti, "the most historical, exclusive joint in Italy." Surely now the whole picture was changed. He had assumed that Andy had been planning to give the letters in the scarlet box back to the Principessa. What if that theory had been wrong?

Andy Prussing had been a smooth, unscrupulous operator. He might have seen a chance for an ideal free movie location and tried to use the letters as a weapon to force the Principessa into persuading her fiancé to open up the most exclusive castle in Italy. Or—which was just as probable—Andy might have put the pressure on the Duca, himself.

The Duca could easily have been the person Emily thought she had heard in the next room. The Duca could have shot Andy as a blackmailer who had threatened his own career and his daughter's marriage. Wouldn't that explain his eagerness to see the crime pinned on Emily?

The Principessa's voice, grave and polite, broke into these rushing speculations: "Perhaps Mr. Miller would like to take a glass of wine with us, Papa?"

Robert looked back into her dark, untroubled eyes. Everything was different now. He saw both the girl and her father as potential murderers. But that was not his prime concern. All that mattered was Emily. He knew he hadn't fooled the Duca. Certainly, when

he left the Palazzo Brabanto, he would be followed. It would be madness to keep Emily at the studio any longer. He would have to smuggle her to some other hiding place at once. And this was his only chance.

He snatched it.

"I'm sorry, Principessa." He smiled at Gabriella Celare. "I would like to stay, but I have another engagement, and I'm late, as it is."

Before any of them could speak, he had taken the Principessa's small hand and was raising it to his lips. "Good night, Principessa. Good night, Duca. Good night, Marchese."

V

MILLER LEFT THE room and hurried through the interminable reception-rooms. In a few moments he was out in the dark street. By a stroke of luck, a taxi was coming around the corner of the square. He jumped into it, gave his address to the driver.

At least, he had won a few precious minutes before the Duca could marshal his "ears and eyes" for the pursuit. Already he had decided where to take Emily. A sculptor friend had gone south that week to Ischia and had left the key of his apartment with Robert in the hope that he might find a sublet. The studio was 'way on the other side of the city beyond the Palatine Hill.

The taxi rattled to a halt outside Robert's apartment house. Telling the driver to wait, he ran up the stairs to the studio. It was all right. Emily was there. She came hurrying toward him, and he felt exultant, as if all the dangers that lay ahead for her had already been overcome. He took her in his arms and kissed her, feeling her heart beating against his.

"Quick, darling! We've got to get out of here. I'll explain later."

He found the key to his friend's studio in a desk drawer and hur-

ried Emily down the stairs into the taxi.

Robert realized that his sudden bolt from the Palazzo Brabanto must have given him away to the Duca, who was much too shrewd not to realize what he was planning to do. As he explained to Emily what had happened and where they were going, he kept turning back to look through the rear window. He half expected the black limousine to appear at any minute. But it wasn't there.

It was after eleven o'clock, and Rome goes to bed early. The familiar foreign streets were almost empty now as they sped through them. They passed the Trevi Fountain, where water cascaded and roared below the enormous baroque Tritons and sea horses. The sight and sound of it, with all its tourist associations, brought a deceptive, comforting sense of normalcy. Robert permitted himself to think, "It's all right. We're getting away with it."

But as they swung out of the thin stream of traffic into the broad, lonely avenue which ran beside the ruins of the Imperial Forum, he noticed that a car had come after them. It wasn't the black limousine. It was a green American sedan. But it was the only other vehicle in sight now and, while the taxi lumbered on toward the Coliseum, which rose huge and dark at the end of the Forum, the sedan clung tenaciously behind them.

In a few moments Robert's forebodings became a certainty. They were being followed. There was no doubt of it. He had underestimated the Duca di Brabanto. While the black limousine had been driving him to the Palazzo, a second group of "ears and eyes" must have been stationed in a green sedan to watch his apartment.

They had reached the Coliseum now. The great circular structure with its spectral, shadowy colonnades loomed to their right. Accelerating wildly, the green sedan hurtled past them and swerved across the street in front of them, blocking their path.

Emily gave a little cry. The driver jammed on his brakes. As the taxi shook to a stop, Robert saw three men climbing from the green sedan. He threw open the cab door, pulled Emily out, and dashed with her toward the sheltering colonnades of the Coliseum. The three men were running, too. But they were not in time to head them off.

Robert's impulse was to turn and confront the Duca's retainers. But he suppressed it. They would have guns. The only thing to do now was to escape.

Here, in the outermost of the three arcades, the dim light from the street cast eerie shadows over broken columns, split cornices, eroded capitals. In front of them a tunnel of stone led deeper into the building toward the central and in-

nermost arcades. Clutching Emily's arm, Robert swung to the right and started to run down the middle cloistral passageway.

Already he could hear the footsteps of their pursuers, echoing from the walls and roofs of the tangle of corridors behind them. Otherwise, there was no hint of human existence, no trace of a modern world with space in it for Andy Prussing and *Roman Romance*. The Coliseum has an evil reputation at night for lurking hoodlums, and Romans avoid it. As they ran on, they might have been fleeing back into the days of Nero.

A miasmic mist, smelling of age and mold, drifted through the enveloping blackness. They swerved to the left and through a second tunnel which emerged into the inmost arcade. They were running now along the brink of the huge roofless arena itself. Below stretched the pitlike cellars which were all that remained of the great gladiatorial stage. Above, the open sky gleamed, scattered with myraid stars.

As they dashed on without a plan Robert began to realize that this great circle of brick and stone was as dangerous to them as a maze. Each of the three circular arcades led back to the place from which it had started. All that the Duca's men had to do was to split up, one going to the left, the other two to the right. Eventually they were bound to catch Robert and Emily in a trap.

They were passing the vague silhouette of a huge wooden cross. Robert paused a moment, glancing down into the cellars. They could drop into them and lose themselves for a while in the network of crumbling dungeons. But sooner or later they would have to come up again and face inevitable capture.

No, he would have to get Emily away from this huge arena which had seemed an asylum but was, in fact, a prison.

The footsteps behind them still threw their muffled, sinister echoes. As they ran, Robert and Emily came to an open colonnade which stretched all the way back to the street. Down its tubular, telescopic length Robert caught a glimpse of the Arch of Constantine, palely illuminated by the street lights beyond.

Instantly he recognized an escape route. If they could cross the broad highway which islanded the Arch they could slip into the Forum, which, as a historic landmark, was closed to the public at night. Once they were in the Forum they could climb to the deserted Imperial Palaces of the Palatine Hill. There, with the subterranean passages, the broken walls, the trees, the excavations, they could find infinite opportunities for concealment. They might even be able to

climb down the far side of the hill and reach the refuge of his friend's apartment.

He whispered to Emily, "Follow me. Run like crazy."

He dodged down the colonnade with Emily at his heels. Within a few moments they had reached the street. It stretched dim and deserted in front of them, with the great marble Arch thrusting up in its center. The footsteps behind them were no longer audible. They sped across the boulevard to the Arch. When Robert had pulled Emily to safety under its protecting canopy he glanced back.

One of the men was hurrying out from the arcades of the Coliseum. The man paused, looking to left and right along the street. After a moment's hesitation he turned and disappeared back into the arena.

As he stood, panting, under the Arch, Robert felt a kind of perverse excitement. Once they had crossed the other half of the highway, the short Via Sacra would take them to the Forum. There was a wire fence around it, and there were night guards too. But the fence would be easy enough to climb, and the four or five guards had a large area to police. His hand found Emily's and pressed it.

"Come on," he said. "We're headed for the Forum."

He took a last glance at the Coliseum. There was no sign of the men. Darting out of the Arch, they ran across the street and into the Via Sacra past tall temple columns which reared delicately against the night sky. They came to the fence. No guard was in sight.

Robert helped Emily up the broad wire mesh. She dropped down on the other side. He was halfway over the fence himself when he heard a cry behind them. He looked back. The Coliseum was still in full view and, running from it across the boulevard toward them, were three dark figures.

Robert jumped down onto the rough turf at Emily's side. Beyond, humping over the Forum like a whale's back, was the Palatine Hill. A flight of stone steps led up its flank. He gripped Emily's arm and started toward them. As they ran up the steps he glanced back over his shoulder. The three men had reached the fence and were scrambling over it.

Robert took the key to his friend's studio from his pocket and pressed it into Emily's hand. "If they look as if they're catching up with us, slip away from me and hide. I'll try to head them off. Go to the apartment and wait for me. Remember the address?"

"Yes."

Robert knew the Palatine Hill as well as one of his own canvases. Just ahead of them there was a ruined palace, and one of its entrances led to a subterranean passage which Nero had built to connect two public buildings. If they

could reach it in time they could slip through it to the Palace of Augustus. Once there, they could lose themselves in the labyrinth of cells and passages and wait for a chance to make their way down the far side of the hill.

They came to the head of the steps, and the worn façade of the palace loomed in front. As Robert hesitated, to search for the right entrance, he could hear the men's footsteps pounding up the hill behind them. But in a second he had found what he wanted—a black, yawning cavity. He drew Emily inside.

They groped their way through several skeletal antechambers and then, dropping down, plunged into the mouth of the tunnel itself.

Far ahead, a faint patch of lighter blackness indicated the end of the passage, but, as they ran toward it, it seemed as if they were moving through the very bowels of the earth. Their footsteps reverberated with telltale echoes. Robert paused, his hand on Emily's shoulder.

As soon as they stopped, the silence was absolute. So the Duca's men didn't know about the tunnel! Now, even if they had seen them slip into the palace, they might spend minutes searching through the maze of corridors and reception halls.

Robert hurried Emily on toward the end of the tunnel. When they reached it he drew her out onto the rocky grass which covered the ruins of the Palace of Augustus. The moment he did so he saw two figures darting toward them from the right. With disgust, he realized that he had been fooled. The Duca's men had known some other quick route above the tunnel.

"Run!" he cried.

As Emily veered off to the left, he threw himself furiously at the two men. He swung at one with his fist, sending him reeling backward. He had jumped at the second man, when he heard Emily cry out behind him. He spun around again and ran in the direction of her voice. He saw her at once. She was struggling with the third man beneath a jagged remnant of wall.

He flung himself against her assailant and broke him loose from her. For a moment he and the man swayed together locked in each other's arms. Then he heard Emily call, "Look out!"

In the same instant, he felt a heavy blow on the back of his head. He tried to ward off this new attack. But a second blow from a gun butt sent him spinning sideways. He felt himself falling. His hand grazed against something. His last thought was: "It's over. They've got her."

VI

MILLER came to with a sense of urgency. His head throbbed as he scrambled to his feet. Glancing

around the starlit ruins, he saw that Emily and the Duca's men were gone.

He started to run back through the subterranean passage. Almost certainly he would be too late to stop the Duca turning Emily over to Antonelli. Once she was in the hands of the police, with Andy's will as the motive, the beggar's evidence, her initial failure to come forward, and her subsequent flight, they would have an open-and-shut case for conviction.

He could no longer help her merely by creating a counterscandal around the Principessa and the Duca. If he were right in suspecting that Gabriella or her father might have murdered Andy Prussing, he would have to prove it now before he could do any good for Emily. And, if neither of them had killed Andy, he would have to find out who had.

His problem was as simple and as frightening as that.

And, as of the moment, almost an impossible task.

He emerged from the passageway onto the flank of the Palatine Hill. Below him, Rome stretched like an enormous blanket scattered with jewels. He ran down into the Forum and climbed the fence. He found a taxi in the Piazza Venezia.

At the Palazzo Brabanto, a liveried footman listened impassively to his demand to see the Duca, conducted him to one of the tapestried reception-rooms, and withdrew. When he returned, he took Robert up the great central stairway to an upstairs sitting-room. The Duca di Brabanto was seated before a fire.

The Duca dismissed the footman and rose. "Well, Mr. Miller." His smile was both affectionate and sly. "You have been keeping me busy tonight."

Robert glared at him. "Where's Emily Layden?"

"Where do you expect her to be?" The Duca waved his small, elegant hand toward a telephone. "Just a few moments ago one of my men called to say they had turned her over to Antonelli. Oh, purely as public-spirited citizens, of course. They had been to a party. They noticed this blonde American girl in a taxi. They were sure she must be the murderess for whom the police were searching. With great difficulty and daring, they captured her. They will almost certainly receive a reward."

He paused. "Incidentally, I instructed them to make no mention of you. I hope you are grateful. You should be."

His sublime assurance that he was holding the whip hand goaded Robert beyond endurance. "Call your tame beggar," he demanded. "Tell him to refuse to identify her. If you don't, I'll phone Antonelli right now and let him know I caught your daughter red-handed

in the murder apartment bending over Andy's corpse."

The Duca's black eyes widened. "But, Mr. Miller, how can I call Luigi Faglione? Ever since he made his report, he has been held incommunicado by the police." His mouth dropped ruefully at the corners. "Besides, I do not really think you would telephone Antonelli. Of course, if you did, you could cause Gabriella, myself, and yourself a great deal of trouble. You, for example, could be arrested for having given false testimony this afternoon. And all that would not help Emily Layden, would it?"

Robert knew that was true, and the Duca knew that he knew it. For a moment they stood looking at each other, Robert belligerent, the Duca at his most bland.

Then the Duca examined the nails of his right hand. "By the way, Mr. Miller, I am interested to know why you have gone to such extraordinary lengths to protect this girl: I suppose you are in love with her."

"She's innocent."

The Duca's eyebrows shot upward. "You have any reason to believe that?"

"Someone else was already there in Andy's apartment. They could have gone in and come out through the back entrance, and your beggar wouldn't have seen them."

"Well, well. You can prove this?"

With a sudden, salvaging flash of insight, Robert realized that he could. "Andy gave everyone a special knock. When I arrived this afternoon with Emily he must have recognized from my knock who it was, but he came to the door with a scarlet box under his arm, the box in which he kept your daughter's letters. That box had nothing to do with me. What possible reason could Andy have had for bringing it to the door unless there was someone already in the apartment—someone whom he didn't dare leave alone with the box?"

The Duca, as if finally satisfied with his manicure, let his right hand drop. "Ingenious, Mr. Miller. Most cogent reasoning. Then who was this person already in the apartment?"

"Why wasn't it you?"

"Me?" The Duca looked only mildly surprised. "Why me?"

"Your daughter's fiancé is the son of the owner of the Castello Marchiatti, isn't he?"

"He is."

"And the Marchiatti family is very proud, very stubborn. They would never, for example, have let Andy use the castle as a location for his movie?"

"Never in a million years."

"This afternoon a business associate of Andy's told me that Andy was expecting to be able to shoot his film at the castle. How could he have dreamed of getting permission unless he'd been planning to use your daughter's letters as a

threat to force you or the Princess into selling the Marchiattis on the idea?"

The Duca returned the challenge in Robert's eyes with an almost impertinent grin. "Once again, an ingenious theory. But I am afraid it does not hold water. Mr. Prussing may have boasted to an associate that his connection with our family would help him to make his film in the castle. But the old Principe Marchiatti is as medieval as his castle.

"Neither Gabriella, myself, nor the President of Italy would have the slightest influence over him. If Mr. Prussing ever discussed the matter with me or my daughter, he would have realized immediately that any blackmail proposition of the sort you suggest was laughable." He paused. "But you are accusing me of shooting him, are you not? We must do something about that."

He strolled toward a dangling tapestried bellpull and tugged it. Glancing back over his shoulder, he looked like a malicious little Donatello cherub.

"What time did you and Miss Layden arrive at Mr. Prussing's? About two-thirty, was it not?"

"That's it."

The footman came in. The Duca sent him to bring the Marchese di Marchiatti. In a few moments the young man with the military mustache walked into the room.

"I am sorry, Renato." The Duca's smile was gracious. "I am sure you were on your way to bed, but I want you to tell Mr. Miller something. What was I doing this afternoon between two and three?"

The Marchese looked bewildered but respectful. He replied in Italian, "You had lunch with Gabriella and me at one-thirty, sir. All afternoon until five we discussed the plans for the marriage."

"And Gabriella remained with us until what time?"

"Until about two-thirty, sir."

"Thank you, Renato." The Duca nodded his dismissal.

The Marchese bowed to him, bowed to Robert, and withdrew.

"You see, Mr. Miller?" The Duca flicked an imaginary thread from the sleeve of his jacket. "I am sure you will accept the word of an impartial witness like the Marchese. Even Gabriella, who left us at two-thirty, could not possibly have arrived at Mr. Prussing's apartment before you and Miss Layden."

Robert's confidence sunk again to low ebb. The Duca had completely eliminated himself and his daughter. So much for that theory. After a moment the little man crossed to him and put his hand coaxingly on his sleeve.

"Come, Mr. Miller, there is no need for us to be enemies. You believe Emily Layden is innocent. I understand and sympathize with your point of view. But let us get one thing straight. I did not kill

Mr. Prussing. Neither did Gabriella. In trying to pin the crime on us you are wasting valuable time. Perhaps someone was in that apartment when you arrived, someone who waited in another room while Miss Layden was there, then murdered Mr. Prussing and escaped by a back entrance before Gabriella put in an appearance. In fact, I think you may well have proved this, but . . ."

Suddenly Robert was listening no longer. Out of the ruins of his former theory a new idea had taken shape in his mind and was once more bringing a ray of hope. Hadn't the Principessa told him that Andy had called the scarlet box his "pretty keepsafe"? Why couldn't he have used it as a cache, not only for the Principessa's letters, but for other embarrassing and potentially profitable documents? The person Emily had heard in the next room could not have been the Duca or the Principessa. Okay. That had been proved. But it could have been someone else who had a vital interest in the box.

He said impulsively, "Duca, may I talk to your daughter?"

"Why, certainly, if it will make you any easier in your mind."

"Alone?"

"Well, it is rather late. I do not imagine her fiancé would approve." The Duca's smile was parental and roguish. "But I think we could manage it."

He rang for the footman again and instructed him to take Robert to the Principessa.

Robert was led through a maze of corridors and ushered into a small sitting-room. Within a few moments the Principessa Celare emerged from an inner door. She was wearing a flowing pink housecoat, and her face was solemn and childish with sleep. But she managed a friendly smile.

"There is a thing I may do for you, Mr. Miller?"

"You found your letters in the box, all right?"

"Yes, yes, thank you. I destroy them."

"Was anything else in the box?"

The Principessa looked surprised. "Why, no. There is nothing."

Robert's heart sank. "You're sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Have you got the box here?"

"Yes, it is in my bedroom."

"Would you get it, please?"

The Principessa turned back into the bedroom and came out again carrying the scarlet leather box. Robert took it from her and put it down on a table. The little gold lock had been broken. He opened the lid. Its silk-lined interior was empty but, with a twinge of excitement, he saw that the inside of the box was much shallower than the outside. This was one of those boxes with secret compartments under false bottoms

which are sold by the hundred to tourists in Florence.

Experimentally Robert pressed the sides of the box. His fingers found the release catch, and the bottom of the interior tilted upward like a lid. Beneath it he saw a sheaf of newspaper clippings. He took them out and glanced through them. All of them had been cut from Michigan newspapers. They were yellowing with age and dated fifteen years before.

He selected one at random and read: "GIRL CONVICTED OF FORGERY.

"Elizabeth Norton, attractive twenty-year-old redhead, was convicted at City Hall today on a charge of forgery and sentenced to from three to five years in the Women's State Penitentiary. Elizabeth Norton, who had been working as a stenographer for the Will-Lind Co., was proved to have forged and cashed a check for $2,000 on the company funds. Her attorney, in his defense address, pleaded leniency on the grounds of the girl's youth. For several years, he said, she had been obsessed by a desire to go to Hollywood and become a movie star. She . . ."

Robert read no farther. There was no need. At the top of the paragraph was a photograph of a girl with large, widely spaced eyes and a blinding smile. She was very young, almost a child, but there was no mistaking the fact that it was a photograph of Betsy Thorne.

The Principessa's curious voice came through to him: "You find what it is you want, Mr. Miller?"

"Yes, I think I've found it." Now that he had got what he had scarcely hoped it was possible to get, he did not feel the excitement he had expected, only a tired relief.

He smiled at Gabriella Celare. "Thank you, Princess. Good night and sweet dreams."

Stuffing the clippings into his pocket, he hurried out of the room. He almost ran into the Duca di Brabanto, who was standing outside in the corridor with three strapping retainers drawn up to block the way.

"Well, Mr. Miller. You are easier in your mind now?"

Robert looked at the three retainers. "Much easier, Duca."

"You no longer have any foolish notions?" The Duca pursed his lips. "If you have, I think it would be wiser for you to spend a few days here with us in the Palazzo until those notions have—evaporated."

Each of the three men took a step closer.

"Of course," murmured the Duca, "if you are really satisfied, if you could give me your word of honor . . ."

Robert grinned at him. "You'd accept my word, Duca?"

The Duca looked shocked. "Why, naturally, Mr. Miller—the word of a gentleman."

"All right. You have my word. Whatever I do, I won't mention you or your daughter."

The Duca beamed like a peasant who had just won the state lottery. With an imperious gesture he dismissed the three men, who loped silently away. He guided Robert in person down the great staircase to the front door, where he shook him warmly by the hand.

"Good night, Mr. Miller. It has been a pleasure to make your acquaintance. You must come to Gabriella's wedding. Yes, certainly you must come. Good night again—and good luck."

He was still standing under the immense arched doorway, radiating affection and good will, when Robert hailed a cab and directed it to the Hotel Excelsior.

VII

IT WAS ALMOST two o'clock by the time Robert reached the great luxury hotel. He did not announce himself through the night clerk. He took the elevator straight up to Betsy Thorne's suite and knocked.

The door was opened by Kate Reynolds. She looked haggard and spent, but she was still fully dressed and she gave him a wry smile of greeting.

"Hi, Robert. Thank heaven, you've come. I'm getting bored with the role of solitary watchwoman."

Robert passed her into the livingroom. All the lights were on. Betsy's pile of mail had been opened and was scattered chaotically over a desk.

"Where's Betsy?" he asked.

"In bed." Kate Reynolds gestured with a lighted cigarette toward the heap of letters. "She asked me to catch up on the mail. I've been doing it to keep from going crazy." She went to a table on which stood a bottle of whisky and glasses. "Have a drink."

"How is she?"

"She's fine."

"Did the police come?"

"They were here for hours. Betsy was wonderful, really. Pulled herself together and went into her act as if they'd been a bunch of technicolor cameras." Kate handed him a drink. "That's a woman of iron, that one. Know what she's doing?"

Robert sipped his drink. The pungent taste of the whisky reminded him that he had eaten nothing since lunch. "No. What's she doing?" he asked, trying to make his voice sound casual.

"She's decided to go on with *Roman Romance*. She's got a lot of faith in it and in me. She's going to finance it herself and show up those lily-livered backers." Kate's grin was proud as she lifted her glass to him. "The King is dead. Long live the King."

Robert looked at her, feeling his dejection increase. Here was another hope to be shattered. He

sat down in a chair next to the crated portrait of Andy.

"I've got to talk to her, Kate. Now!"

"But she's asleep. Can't you give her a break?"

"No, no break."

Kate Reynold's intelligent eyes surveyed his grave face for a moment. Then she gave a little shrug. "About Andy, eh? Well, why not? Betsy's just a warm, lovable human being like the rest of us. That's what they say in the fan magazines, and they should know. A little waking-up won't kill her."

She went into the bedroom. Left alone, Robert took the clippings out of his pocket. Why should he feel ashamed at what he was going to do? It was his only possible hope for saving Emily.

And yet it was galling to him, because now that he knew the truth he despised Andy Prussing. Andy deserved to be dead. Even the most fanatical admirer of success could not condone a man who had unearthed a sordid episode in a movie star's youth and blackmailed her into boosting his waning reputation by appearing in his movie and going through a bogus publicity marriage.

He could see how Betsy Thorne had been goaded to the point of murder. A woman who had been ambitious enough at twenty to commit forgery, who, in spite of a prison sentence, had climbed to the top of the world's toughest profession, could be exploited only so far. No wonder she had reached a point where the only thing to do had been to shoot her persecutor.

Betsy swept in from the bedroom, with Kate at a respectful distance behind her. She was swathed in a negligee of white silk and ostrich plumes. The smile, under the gleaming red hair, was as incandescent as ever. The glamour, the synthetic grandeur were all wrong for this scene in the drama. They seemed pathetic to him now.

"Good evening, Mr. Miller. Do forgive me for keeping you waiting. I was asleep. It's been a terrible day." She was being The Trooper, charming a reporter, any reporter. "Kate tells me you have something to say to me."

Robert got up. "I'm sorry, Miss Thorne. I wouldn't do this if someone else hadn't been arrested." He held out the clipping for her to see. "I found these in Andy's scarlet box. You were interrupted just after you'd shot him. That's why you didn't have time to get at them, wasn't it? You had to run off through the back exit in the kitchen."

The smile remained on Betsy's face, but it no longer seemed part of her. It looked as if it were a decoration hung there at random.

Robert continued: "You know what they are, don't you? You don't want me to read them out loud."

Kate Reynolds took a step closer.

Betsy Thorne stood for a moment in silence. Then she said, "Of course I know what they are, Mr. Miller. Do you imagine a woman could forget a thing like that?" The great eyes, fixing his face, were absolutely steady. "But what do you mean about my shooting Andy, about my running out of some back exit?"

He said, "Didn't Andy blackmail you into appearing in his movie?"

"Of course he did."

"And wasn't he blackmailing you into the marriage?"

"Of course he was." Suddenly the smile and the face got together again, and Betsy was beaming at him with the indulgent affection of a worldly mother handling an awkward adolescent. "But you don't imagine I'd have killed him for that. My dear Mr. Miller, if I'd killed everyone who had forced me to do unpleasant things in my career, I'd have hit the electric chair long before this."

She turned to Kate: "He doesn't seem to know about the police. Didn't you tell him?"

Kate, who had looked awkward and confused, gave a sudden grin. "Sorry, Robert. If I'd known your mission I'd have briefed you. I haven't the slightest idea what all these hints and clippings are about. But Betsy's already been cleared of the murder by Antonelli. She was at Tivoli all afternoon. There are a couple of thousand amorous Italian fans panting to back up one of the most over-subscribed alibis in history."

So that was that! For the first time Robert felt really defeated. For the first time, too, in his mood of exhaustion, he faced the possibility which he had never let himself face before. Emily Layden might be guilty, after all. Perhaps he, from the beginning, had been making a disastrous fool of himself.

"So now, Mr. Miller"—Betsy Thorne's voice was still maternally tolerant—"perhaps you'll be kind enough to give me those clippings. I'm sure I don't want them lying around where any gossip columnist with a good nose can smell them out. This evening, when you told me Andy was dead, they were the first things I thought of. No wonder I fainted."

She was perfectly at ease now. One of her faultlessly manicured fingers went to her chin in her celebrated "reflective" mannerism. "Do you know something? It's crazy, but I feel sorry for Andy. He wasn't such a bad one. I've had to handle a dozen worse in my time. Of course, he was stuck on himself, but his heart wasn't all celluloid. In fact, after he got to know me, I think he kind of fell for me. Only this morning he called me up. He said he'd been thinking about himself and had

decided he was a louse for putting the screws on me. I could quit if I wanted to, he said. He was going to tear up the clippings and I'd have nothing further—"

Robert wasn't listening any more. It was almost as if Andy had stepped into the room. He heard his booming voice as he had heard it that afternoon at the door of his apartment: *This seems to be house-cleaning day.* Hadn't he cleaned house with Emily and the Principessa? Why shouldn't he also—? *The portrait's gone. I sent it to Betsy with a plea for the forgiveness of past sins and a passionate hope for future bliss.*

A plea for the forgiveness of past sins!

Miller swung around to the wooden crate in the corner. There was a buzzer on the wall in front of him. He pressed it, as both women watched him in silent curiosity. Soon a night porter came to the door. Robert told him in Italian to bring a hammer and screw driver. In a few moments he returned with the tools.

Robert closed the door on him and crossed back to the crate. Soon he had pried off the front boards and tossed the tools down on the carpet. His portrait of Andy, red-faced, affable, with a faintly ironical smile, gazed out into the room from an elaborate gilt frame.

Stuck in a corner of the frame was a neat white envelope.

The "plea!"

Robert snatched it up. The one word *Betsy* was written on it. He slit the envelope and pulled out a single folded sheet of notepaper. As he glanced at the message in Andy's vigorous, sprawling handwriting, the excitement became triumph surging through him.

For one moment his gaze rested on the untidy heap of letters on the desk. Then he looked at Betsy Thorne.

He asked sharply, "Did you tell Kate to open your mail, Miss Thorne?"

"Why, no, Mr. Miller."

He turned then to Kate Reynolds. She had taken a step toward him and was standing between him and Betsy.

"Well, Kate"—his voice sounded odd to himself, edgy, unfamiliar—"you needn't have bothered to open those letters. The one you were looking for was there inside the crate. Like to hear it?"

He read out loud from Andy's message:

"Betsy dear: Is it too late to prove this is a portrait of a nice-enough guy? Can stinkers deodorize themselves? I meant what I said on the phone. Heaven knows what's happened to me. Maybe the Romance of the Century turned out to be true—on my side, at least. But, baby, it's happened. You can walk out of my life with your lovely head high as a giraffe. I hope you won't; you know that. But now it is entirely up to you. You are your own woman again.

"Don't worry about Kate. I'm going to make with the drama and tear up the clippings in front of her this afternoon. In a way, I'm grateful to her. If she hadn't been a Michigan girl, too, and dug up the dirt, I'd maybe never have met you. But, as I said, don't worry about her. I wasn't the only one she's put up to a blackmail deal. I know a lot of other unsavory collaborations in her past—quite enough to keep a permanent swath of adhesive tape across that pretty little mouth. She'll bust twelve blood vessels, of course, when I tell her I've reformed and that *Roman Romance* is probably headed for the ash can, but . . ."

Robert stopped reading and looked up straight into Kate Reynolds' face. The sight of it shocked him. He'd been wrong about Andy, he thought. Andy hadn't been the success maniac, after all. Here it was in the flesh, in this aging, tight-lipped woman. He could see it all plainly in those eyes that stared back at him—the greed, the determination, the loneliness, the death in life.

There wasn't any need to say more. The letter made everything clear. It would have been comparatively simple, in the crowd and confusion at Tivoli, for Kate to slip away and keep her fateful appointment with Andy. Then Emily had interrupted the "dra-

ma" between them. After she had gone, Kate had killed him. Why not? When he had "reformed," when he was standing in the way of her relentless plunge upward.

But he hadn't destroyed the clippings. He had locked them in the desk drawer and, after she had killed him, the Princess had arrived and Kate had had to escape. She had known Robert would be coming for the sitting and would discover the body. No wonder she had returned to the apartment to see whether she couldn't get hold of the evidence against Betsy which, so long as she was the only one to know of it, would assure her career for the rest of her life.

Yes, the letter was more than enough to convince Antonelli. Emily would be out of jail before morning.

The silence now was hollow as a shell. Betsy Thorne was gazing abstractedly down at the hammer and scattered wooden boards on the carpet. Kate Reynolds stood absolutely still, the tip of her tongue moistening her upper lip.

Then, with a movement so sudden that it took him completely off his guard, she plunged a hand into her pocketbook and whipped out a revolver. She aimed it straight at him.

"Smart. Smart, Robert. Smart. But the clippings are here. When you're dead, when I've destroyed that letter, when I've accused Betsy of double murder and shown them the clippings—who do you think the police are going to believe? Her or me?"

There was a moment of wild confusion. He saw Betsy plunge down and then up. He heard the sharp explosion of the fired gun. He heard a scream. As he sprang forward at random, he saw Kate Reynolds toppling to the floor. The revolver fell from her hand. Automatically, he jumped to get it. As he did so he saw Betsy standing over the prostrate woman.

She had never looked more serene or more glamorous. Even the folds of her silk-and-ostrich-plume negligee might have been carefully arranged for a "take." But her vivid smile had in it now a touch of grimness and, in her faultlessly manicured hand, she was holding the porter's heavy hammer.

Robert looked at her incredulously. "You hit her with the hammer!"

"Only just in time, Mr. Miller. It spoiled her aim."

"You—you saved my life," I told her.

Betsy Thorne nodded solemnly. "I guess I did. You have to be quick to stay alive. That's what I always say." She arched her penciled eyebrows. "I knew she'd killed Andy, of course. She as good as told me. But what could I do? With that prison record to hang over my head she had me

strapped. Think how it would look in a gossip column! That's why I even let her force me into going on with the movie."

She glanced down at the unconscious woman with infinite disdain. "That was a nasty one, that was. That was the worst I've come across yet."

For a moment she stood reflectively silent. Then she looked up at him. "You're going to call the police now, Mr. Miller?"

"I suppose so."

"And I guess they'll have to hear about that little Michigan episode. "Well"—Betsy Thorne's smile was restored again to its usual blinding self-assurance—"Antonelli seems like quite a good guy. I don't think I'll have much trouble persuading him to be discreet, do you?"

Robert was gazing at her in unfeigned admiration. "I don't think you'd have much trouble doing anything you felt like doing, Miss Thorne."

He went to the phone, thinking rather dazedly, "It's finished. Soon I'll see Emily."

Betsy Thorne had selected a piece of string from among the open packages on the desk. As he asked for the police she had rolled Kate Reynolds over onto her face and was competently tying her wrists together.

DAWN HAD ALREADY broken when Robert and Emily came out of police headquarters. As they strolled through the awakening city, thin golden light caressed the streets, the ancient façades, the gay, spouting fountains.

They reached the head of the Spanish Steps, and paused. In front of them, the dome of St. Peter's seemed to float above a smoke of mist like a vast, opalescent balloon. An old woman with a scarf knotted around her head was climbing the steps, and a young workman in denims was strolling down them, whistling jauntily. Suddenly the young man saw the old woman and the old woman saw the young man.

"C'iao, Luisetta."

"Buon' giorno. Buon' giorno, Sergino."

They ran to each other, they threw their arms around each other; they kissed as if they had met after years of separation.

Robert turned to Emily. The happiness flowing through him was like the Roman sunlight.

"C'iao, Emila."

"Buon' giorno. Buon' giorno, Robertino."

They threw their arms around each other. They kissed as if they had met after years of separation.

Then they walked down the steps hand in hand.

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THE CROCODILE DRESSING CASE

A true British crime thriller . . . so darkly off the beaten track it's sure to make lonely roads seem a little chillier murderwise.

by ROY VICKERS

WHENEVER A husband is murdered by a lover with the connivance of the wife, Englishmen bring up the Thompson-Bywaters case of forty years ago, and discuss all over again, with the zest of amateur crime experts, whether Edith Thompson ought to have been hanged.

The Chaundry-Lambert case paralleled it closely in essentials. Phyllis Chaundry who had probably never heard of her prototype —resembled Edith Thompson in many ways. Unlike the latter, she was never brought to trial. Indeed, she married James Lambert —with all the trappings of middle-class respectability, made possible by the elimination of Arthur Chaundry.

Like Edith Thompson, she wrote and talked to her lover a great deal of high-falutin.

A recurrent theme was that she now felt that it was "blaspheming against nature" to endure the affection of her elderly husband— who had been 45 when she had married him with no little eagerness and pride in his position.

The poor fellow, she wrote, was so afflicted with the infirmities of age that she sometimes wished she

Roy Vickers has influenced virtually every writer of distinction in the mystery story field. He has the unique distinction, as Ellery Queen has pointed out, of being the greatest master of the so-called "inverted" detective story since the invention of that brilliant mystery technique.

had the courage to help him out of his misery, and, by implication, out of this world. Such an act would be purely and simply a mercy murder.

At first James Lambert thought it merely tall talk. At twenty-six he was as intelligent and mentally healthy as the next man. He was a car agent, with a repair shop in the suburb of Rubington.

His passion for Phyllis overwhelmed him, to his own vast astonishment. She had large dark eyes—whose stupidity he mistook for unearthly kindness—thick dark hair, a sinuous, expressive body.

Gradually, in the brain of James Lambert, the mercy murder idea began to take root. "But you mustn't do anything about it on your own," he warned her. "You'd get caught. You do just what I tell you."

"Tell me now!" she begged in an ecstasy of obedience.

"On Thursday night at eight he's due at the meeting of the Greenfellows at Warthame. He's treasurer, isn't he? Good! Tell him you'd be lonesome, all by yourself in the house and you're going to the Palais with your sister.

"He'll be using the Chrysler—straight from the office without coming home. You ring up and hire from me, saying you want Albert to drive, as he's so slow and reliable. You to collect Eileen. Instead of Albert, I'll turn up and come with you to the Palais. I'll tell you the rest on the night."

On the night—which was that of March 6—Phyllis rang her husband at 9:40. The telephone on the committee-room table of the Greenfellows' Club had one of those earpieces which are audible at several feet. So the secretary and the chairman both heard the essentials.

"Arthur, I'm so sorry to interrupt, but I feel you would wish me to under the circumstances. When the car I hired turned up just after you had gone, James Lambert was driving instead of one of his staff. He's in evening dress and came in with us.

"I've danced twice with him, out of politeness, and I've told him I won't dance any more. There are some people here who know us, and I thought perhaps it would be better if you were to come here and pick me up when your meeting is over. We don't want *talk*, do we, Arthur?"

Arthur Chaundry, a plodding architect, successful in a small way, was inclined to be sensitive about younger men dancing with his young wife.

"You have behaved very properly in ringing me, dear," he assured her. He was just old enough to have inherited a Victorian pomposity from his father. "I will be there about ten-thirty."

"It closes then, and I shall be left all alone. Try to be here at twenty past, please, Arthur. If you come by the new road it's much shorter—it was thrown open on Monday. Turn left as you leave the Greenfellows."

Crudity such as this characterized the crime throughout. The only part that was not crude and obvious was James Lambert's timing. He left the Palais, enticed Chaundry to stop the Chrysler and get out, battered him to death with a monkey-wrench, and returned to the Palais within eleven minutes.

Chaundry had been carrying a hundred and nine pounds in currency notes and thirty shillings in silver belonging to the Greenfellows. Lambert subsequently burnt the notes and pocketed the silver. No one had seen him leave or reenter the Palais.

About ten-fifteen the two girls reclaimed their cloaks. James was pleasurably surprised at Phyllis's coolness.

"If you're both ready I'll bring the car round," he said.

"Be quick and you'll dodge the rush," said Phyllis.

That was a mistake, of course. Phyllis ought to have announced that her husband was coming to take her home.

"You did say you were going to telephone Arthur," prompted Lambert. "Did you change your mind?"

"Oh, I forgot! I did telephone him. And he said he would be here about ten twenty."

To his astonishment, Lambert saw that she really had forgotten. "It's ten-twenty now," he said. "I'll leave word that we've gone on."

When he brought the car round he tipped the door man.

"If a Mr. Chaundry inquires for Mrs. Chaundry, tell him that she left with Mr. Lambert and her sister," he said.

As arranged, he took Eileen home first, then drove to Chaundry's house. He went into the house with Phyllis.

"Well, that's that," said Lambert. "I'll wait up to half an hour for the police. Better if I'm here when they call."

"The police!" echoed Phyllis. "What police?"

"Steady now. You've been wonderful all night. Everything's all right, just as I promised you it would be. I ran the car on to that stretch of waste ground and switched the lights off. They're sure to spot it almost at once. We want them to."

"Jim!" Her eyes were wide with terror and she was breathing very rapidly. "Have you killed Arthur?"

"Keep your head, Phyl. Everything is going to be all right. Arthur never felt anything."

"It's horrible!" she gasped.

"You mustn't think of it in that

way. It's a mercy murder. That's what you told me yourself. You meant it, didn't you?"

"What's the good of saying that now!" she sobbed. "I never supposed for a moment you would be mad enough to go through with it!"

A fresh wave of horror broke over her. "Jim! Oh, Jim, you will be hanged! I can't bear it."

"If you don't stop these tantrums, we'll both be hanged!" His seriousness secured her full attention. "If I'm put in the dock, nothing I can say or do can save you from coming with me. I killed him and all you did was telephone. That's true enough. But just the telephone call will make you my accomplice."

He explained the fine points of the law in regard to such matters. "I've fixed everything. All you have to do is tell the truth. Mention everything and admit everything—except that you know I killed Arthur, and that I told you to telephone. You said you always wanted to obey me in everything—now's your chance."

She gulped in the aftermath of crying. She was becoming a little calmer.

"That's the stuff, darling!" He patted her shoulder. She leant towards him and wanted to be kissed, but he couldn't manage it, just then.

"Was my crocodile dressing case in the car?" she asked. "He said he would bring it back from the menders for me."

"Yes. And that purple scarf of yours. I had a look round—afterwards. But don't think about details. They're all provided for."

She accepted the information in silence.

"Anything worrying you?" he asked.

"Is—is Arthur in the car?"

"No. It would be better if you tried to keep your mind off all that."

"I was thinking—I wish you had brought the case away. If there's no one in the car it might be stolen."

She had no sense of proportion. Bring the dressing-case along, and make everything easy for the police!

"I didn't occur to me at the time," he said to humor her.

"It's a lovely case!" she sighed. "I was very upset when I tore a gash in it. But Arthur says there's a sort of invisible mending process, and that it won't show."

With the murder barely an hour old—at this moment when her own life and his depended on the reasonableness of her behavior—it was inconceivable to him that she could be genuinely anxious about an item of luggage. He assumed that it was a device to stave off what she would call 'the horrors.'

"Arthur paid a hundred and twenty pounds for it. It has solid

gold fittings!" She rambled on, giving him details in which he took no interest, although he encouraged her to keep her mind on so safe a subject while he watched the clock.

"As soon as I've gone, go upstairs and take some of your clothes off," he told her. "See them in your dressing-gown. Tell them I dropped in for a drink. Tell them everything truthfully except the one thing—you know!"

"I shall be brave," she promised, "for your sake."

LAMBERT LEFT HER at ten minutes to midnight. Phyllis went obediently upstairs. Some fifteen minutes later, wearing an ensemble-de-nuit in pale violet, she opened the door to the local superintendent and a police sergeant.

He was a good sergeant who knew the gossip of the neighborhood and had distilled it for his superior. They arrived not unprepared to discover a Thompson-Bywaters set-up.

The superintendent made the customary set speech, breaking to her, as gently as he could, the news that her husband had been killed.

She gave a little gasp, put one hand to her head and with the other applied a dainty wisp of handkerchief to her eyes.

Both the superintendent and the sergeant had seen a great many women cry. They were, in a sense, experts at watching women cry. That wisp of handkerchief, they could have told you, would have been no earthly use for the real thing.

"As I understand it, Mrs. Chaundry," said the superintendent, "your husband told you before he left for the office in the morning that he would pick you up at the dance hall after his Greenfellows meeting?"

"No. I was to hire a car from Lambert's Garage and pick up my sister. But instead, in the course of the evening, I telephoned my husband and asked him to call for me after his meeting."

"Why?"

"Because Mr. Lambert came personally with the car instead of one of his staff. We know him socially and he came in with us and danced with us. And my husband is—was—rather jealous sometimes. So I thought it would be better if I telephoned and had him pick me up."

The superintendent saw that he would need new facts and a check-up on those already in his possession.

The sergeant resumed the routine. "Can you furnish a list of any valuables known or believed to have been carried by the deceased at the time when he met his death?" he asked her.

"My husband was treasurer of the Greenfellows and he may

have been carrying a lot of their cash, and I should think that was why he was killed, if the cash is missing."

"Any other valuables carried by the deceased at the time of—"

"Well he was carrying my crocodile dressing-case which he was bringing back from Lorota's in Regent Street, where it had gone to be mended and which cost more than one hundred pounds. And a purple scarf of mine which I left behind yesterday. They'd both be on the back seat."

She paused while the sergeant made his note, then added, "The dressing-case was in the car, wasn't it—on the back seat?"

"What makes you sure it was in the car, Mrs. Chaundry, and on the back seat?"

Phyllis realized dimly that she had made a slip, but her main concern was the fate of her dressing-case.

"He moves his feet a lot when he's driving and I didn't want him to kick it. So he promised me he'd put it on the back seat where it would be out of the way." With growing anxiety she pressed her question. "It's still there, isn't it?"

"The scarf was there, but there was no dressing-case."

"You mean it's gone—stolen?"

"I can only tell you," answered the superintendent, "that it was not in your husband's car when we made our examination."

"You must get it back for me!" she shrilled. "You *must!*"

This time the police were able to add one more to the total of women they had seen cry. Indeed, an amateur could have made no mistake. Real tears coursed down her cheeks, smudging her make-up, spoiling her attractive appearance.

"I shall never forgive myself. I ought to have taken it and brought it back myself. That wretched accident! I squeezed it against the door handle of the car and gashed it in the middle—on the side that shows when you carry it."

Asked for a description, she restrained her grief and became almost excessively helpful. She described the size, the pattern, the sheen, exact detail of the fittings and contents of the bottles, which had not been removed when the case had been returned to the dealer's for repair.

THE SUPERINTENDENT was somewhat dispirited. The story of the expensive dressing-case menaced the theory of the robbery being a blind—if her story was true.

The police checked on the dealer who had mended the dressing-case, and on the attendant at the garage near the Greenfellows Hall, where Mrs. Chaundry had deposited a dressing-case of crocodile in the office, declaring it to be specially valuable. The attendant had himself placed it on the back

seat of the car when Mr. Chaundry drove away to his death.

No dressing-case had been deposited at the Palais—none found by the roadside. If the robbery had been a blind, it would have been just as effective without the addition of the suitcase.

That was to say, if the robbery was a blind there must have been a real theft of the dressing-case, by somebody other than James Lambert, while the car was standing on the waste ground.

Suspicion of Lambert rested on evidence of a distressingly negative nature, though there were plenty of clues pointing in his direction. The deceased, though carrying cash and goods of a value exceeding two hundred pounds, had stopped his car on a new by-road at a point near waste ground, which suggested that he had been hailed by someone whose face he knew. Why not James Lambert?

Chaundry had got out of the car, whether of his own free will or otherwise could not be determined. The body had been found in the ditch a few yards away, together with the canvas bag, stamped with the insignia of the Greenfellows, which had contained the money.

Further, Lambert admitted that Mrs. Chaundry had told him that she had asked her husband to call for her and had advised using that route. Brother officials of the Greenfellows had confirmed the statement about the telephone conversation. No one was able to state positively that Lambert had been in the Palais de Danse between ten and ten-fifteen.

When the coroner's jury returned a verdict of murder by person or persons unknown, the local police called in New Scotland Yard. The Yard were unable to establish a prima facie case against Lambert.

Even if James Lambert had partly accepted the mercy-murder excuse, his motive had been that of attaining the woman he desired in conditions of respectability. She had made it clear to him that Chaundry would not consider divorce.

Now, if you murder a man in order to attain respectability it is uneconomical to throw respectability away immediately after the murder. Respectability, for instance required Phyllis to impose on herself a period of mourning—a necessity she had overlooked when dreaming of the advantages of a mercy-murder to the survivors.

She was hurt when James left the coroner's court without offering to see her home. She rang him up to ask if she had offended him in any way.

"It will cause talk if we meet anywhere immediately. Couldn't you go away and stay at a boarding house for a month or so?"

"A month! Jim, I think it's horrible of you to even suggest such a thing. At least we could meet in town if you *really wanted* to see me."

It was the first time she had shown temper.

Through her sister, Eileen, he arranged a meeting at a teashop in London. Eileen left them alone for half an hour, during which time Phyllis consented to go, not indeed to a boarding house but to the best hotel in Torquay.

"The solicitor told me that Arthur had left me more than enough to live on, so it would be false economy for me to go to a place I might not like, wouldn't it?"

"That's your affair, darling. When we set up housekeeping, anything that comes to you from Chaundry will be just your pocket-money."

"That'll be lovely! How soon can we get married?"

"That's what I've been wondering. People generally wait a year.

She was horrified.

"Well, maybe we can cut it down to six months. We'll see how things work out."

She was unhappy about it, but reluctantly accepted his decision.

"You'll write to me every day won't you, Jim!"

"I'm not going to write to you at all. And you're not going to write to me. You can tell me your news through Eileen and I'll do the same. The time will pass all right, and we'll have the rest of our lives together."

She braced up as Eileen returned. It had been arranged that the girls should leave first. Lambert was thanking Eileen when Phyllis cut in:

"Oh, Jim, I forgot to tell you about the police!"

James Lampert's heart skipped a beat.

"That superintendent! I had—well, almost words with him! I don't believe he's doing a single thing to help find my dressing case."

After she had gone, he tried to come to terms with himself about her. She was putting the murder of Chaundry out of her mind, had already done so. She had not brought herself to believe that she had played an important part in the murder.

She did not realize that she was herself in peril. She had not supposed he was lying when he had told her that her danger was equal to his. It was purely and simply that her mentality was unable to retain the idea that to telephone a man and ask him to drive you home might involve the same degree of guilt, in the eyes of the law, as striking the fatal blow.

There followed a very shattering corollary. As she was incapable of caring about anybody but herself, it was not at all unreasonable that the loss of a favorite toy

should interest her more than her lover's peril.

"Which means that she's not as great a fool as I am."

AT HIS WEDDING in the following October, James Lambert was unable to shake off a feeling of surprise that they were both at large at the end of the six months of separation.

The sense of triumph, of at last possessing the object of his desire, was altogether lacking.

At her suggestion, they went for their honeymoon to the same hotel in Torquay wherein she had passed the first few weeks of widowhood. She was thinking more about the hotel than about their reunion.

During their last week he felt a pang of jealousy in regard to a young man, wealthy and much more socially gifted than himself, whom he knew only as Wilfred.

He had refused to live in Chaundry's house, which had been left to her. So she sold it and increased her already enormous wardrobe. They moved into his house, conveniently near the garage. His business continued to expand, giving him no leisure.

Phyllis had a simple theory of business. If you were your own master, you could obviously take time off whenever you wanted to —a theory which began to produce domestic jars before the first year had been completed.

It was after a small tiff, which she had forgotten and he had not, that she happened to remark, "Oh, did I ever tell you that I went to Scotland Yard about my dressing-case and they didn't do anything either!"

"If you had any sense at all you'd have dropped the entire matter," he snarled.

He made a journey to Regent Street, to Lorota's. He asked for a fitted crocodile dressing-case, to cost one hundred and twenty pounds.

Mr. Lorota regretted that he had not, just then, a case at exactly that price. The nearest was one at one hundred and fifty or approaching from below, a really excellent article at ninety guineas. With, of course, real gold fittings.

Lambert hesitated, then decided on the ninety guineas one.

He arrived home at four instead of seven to find her chatting on the telephone with Wilfred. He waited until she had finished then displayed the dressing-case.

"Jim, you darling! She gave him a hug. "You know how I adore crocodile! Why, it's just like mine!" She turned it in the light and crooned over it. "And I'm *sure* it's got a triple row of fittings and its very own manicure set."

She snapped open the catches.

"Oh!" No more able to conceal her feelings than a child, she had given a little moan of disappoint-

ment. "Perhaps the manicure set is this side."

It was immediately evident to Lambert that the case had but a double row of fittings and that no manicure set was supplied with the ninety guineas model! The case lay at her feet, open. He felt that Lorota had cheated him.

He found her looking up at him with large, moist eyes.

"Jim darling, you mustn't mind! You mustn't be disappointed—really you mustn't!"

Lambert stared at his wife, then stared at the case, with the same expression. He took a flying kick at the case, which sent it hurtling across the room into a Japanese urn, which had been one of her few contributions to the household.

The urn was smashed—so, more or less, was the ninety guineas dressing-case. Alone in the room he picked it up and carried it to the hot water furnace into which he thrust it, gold fittings and all. Then he went back to the garage and worked the whole evening.

Phyllis told herself that Jim no longer loved her—a correct conclusion arrived at, however, by faulty reasoning. She left him for Wilfred, without any of that tiresome waiting about through fear of what people would say. People said all they could, which was not very much because neither Lambert nor any of the neighbors knew Wilfred's correct name or whereabouts.

PHYLLIS CHAUNDRY'S appeal to Scotland Yard had been made during the period of active investigation. With her assertion that it was "of the utmost importance to recover the dressing-case"—Detective-Inspector Karslake had agreed, though for different reasons.

It was obvious that James Lambert had not taken the dressing-case. He could not have disposed of it without the aid of a colleague, nor could he have had any motive.

On the other hand, the man who had stolen the dressing-case was almost certainly the murderer. His very existence, if it could be proved, would destroy the substantial, if negative, evidence suggesting Lambert's guilt.

In the first few days they had picked up a clue of great promise. A casual laborer, known as Conrad the Tinker, had spent three weeks in a lodging house at Rubington, and had disappeared the night Chaundry was murdered, though nearly a week's pay had been due him.

They did not find the man until the Chaundry case had been filed in the Department of Dead Ends for nearly two years.

Not that things had been wholly quiescent. No fewer than five crocodile dressing-cases, three

with real gold fittings, had been foisted on Detective-Inspector Rason. Two of them had never been reclaimed.

And then, seventeen months after the murder of Chaundry, a sixth crocodile dressing-case arrived with every appearance of being the right one.

With it came the kind of tale which was a common-place in the department. A six-ton lorry had backed into a cottage in Wiltshire, partly destroying it. Among the debris was a wooden chest, six feet by three, padlocked but opened by the Salvage Corps, which contained a number of articles listed as "missing believed stolen," including a crocodile dressing-case with real gold fittings and initials "P.C."

The cottage had been occupied by an elderly woman named Mence, living alone. The chest, she said, was not hers but her son's.

Further questioning left little doubt that her son was Conrad the Tinker. She finally admitted that he was serving a sentence of three years in Scotland, with two years to run, less time out for good behavior.

It looked remarkably well taken care of. All the same, Rason reminded himself, that "P.C." might stand for "Phyllis Chaundry," or any one of the large number of names that began with "C." So he checked with Lorota, the dealer, after which he went in search of Phyllis, to invite her to the Yard to make formal identification of her property.

He arrived at Lambert's house. The daily help did not directly answer his request to see Mrs. Lambert.

"You'd better see Mr. Lambert. He can tell you what's going on a lot better than I can—" which, from a detective's point of view, was a good beginning.

James Lambert told him quite frankly what was going on, the essential point being that he did not even know whether his wife was in the country or abroad.

"If it would help you for me to identify the dressing-case—"

"Thank you Mr. Lambert." Rason always accepted an offer of help, whether he wanted it or not. "As a matter of fact, we need you on another angle, too. The Tinker—Mence, his name is—says he was employed by you about that time as a temporary washer. We need an identification on that point."

"It may be true, and I may never have seen him. I spend most of my time in the office."

"Other way around, I mean, Mr. Lambert. He says he knows you by sight. We want him to pick you out. If I may use your telephone they'll have the parade ready by the time we arrive."

Lambert didn't like the look of it.

"Theft of goods—that's only a trifle," explained Rason, as they drove to the Yard. "It's the goods as evidence that counts. Why, come now, Mr. Lambert, between you and me, this Chaundry affair must have been something of a nuisance to you? I bet it has! I'm not supposed to say it—but when we've buttoned up this bit about the dressing-case—well, I guess it'll be a relief to you if it turns out he murdered Chaundry."

"Oh I see!" Lambert had not seen it before that moment. Now he faced a new kind of horror. He had never envisaged the chances of an innocent man being convicted of the murder.

At Scotland Yard he was greeted by Detective-Inspector Karslake as an old acquaintance. Presently, a detective-sergeant conducted Lambert to a courtyard, where he fell in line with a round dozen men.

Conrad the Tinker was told to walk down the line. He stopped for a moment in front of Lambert, in evident recognition, then passed on without speaking. The parade broke up.

"That didn't take long, did it!" chirped Rason. "We'll get the report on it presently."

Karslake joined them on the way to Rason's office. Rason's room was in its normally disgraceful state. On his desk, dumped on an open directory, stood a crocodile dressing-case, which instantly absorbed Mr. Lambert's attention.

"May I look at that case?" he asked.

"By all means, Mr. Lambert. Do what you like!"

Lambert picked up the case, turned it and put it down again.

"That's not the right dressing-case!" he announced. As Rason gaped at him, he supplemented: "It's like the one my wife had, but it's not hers. Her case had her initials "P.C." cut on the side. This case has never been cut for initials."

"Now look here, Mr. Lambert." Rason was laboriously patient. "Your wife—Mrs. Chaundry as she was then—gave us a two hundred and thirty words, close-description of her dressing-case. All about the bottles and gawd-knows-what! Not a word about her initials."

"She forgot—she often does forget the main thing. The initials were there, all right, "P.C." Done curly, instead of straight."

"Like this?" asked Rason.

From under the wall map sprawling on the floor, Rason produced a crocodile dressing-case, looking now a little dingy. It bore the initials "P.C." slightly curly.

Lambert regarded it with profound distaste. The Tinker would have to be hanged. "Yes," he admitted. "That's her dressing-case."

"My fault from first to last!" groaned Rason.

He broke off as a messenger entered and handed a slip to Karslake.

"Report on the Tink—on the convict, Mence, sir."

Karslake glanced at the slip, then passed it to Rason. Rason read it, then, characteristically, put it in his waistcoat pocket.

"Well, we mustn't talk about my troubles, Mr. Lambert. We will have to talk about yours. I'm sorry, but I have to arrest you and charge you with the murder of Arthur Chaundry."

While Rason was reciting the routine warning, Lambert reminded himself that there had been no one on the road when he had killed Chaundry and that there was no nearby place of concealment for anyone.

"That's a bit of a knock, Mr. Rason," he said coolly. "You know your job. But if you're betting on the unsupported statement of that convict—"

"The Tinker doesn't connect you with the murder!" exclaimed Rason. "He only says you were the owner of the garage. You can read the report yourself." He produced it for inspection.

"Then what's it all about?" demanded Lambert.

"Your arrest, do you mean? Oh, your wife's evidence that is going to hang you." Noting the other's incredulous expression, he went on, "Come back to Mrs. Chaundry—as she was then, Lambert. She didn't *forget* those initials on her dressing-case. How come? Because she'd never seen those initials on her dressing-case.

"Lorota tried to mend a gash in the dressing-case, but the invisible mending stunt didn't come off. So he covered the mark by cutting those initials, which you don't generally cut in crocodile. She didn't know the initials were there. But you did. Because you saw them in the car when you killed Chaundry. Your own statements prove that it was not possible for you to have seen those initials at any other place or time."

Lambert blinked, groping for an answer. It had been true. Dazed, excited and as anxious to get away quickly as he'd been, he'd noticed the initials.

"You've had a raw deal, Lambert. We'd never have got you if she hadn't bleated about that dressing-case. We know she put Chaundry on the spot for you. What about a full confession?"

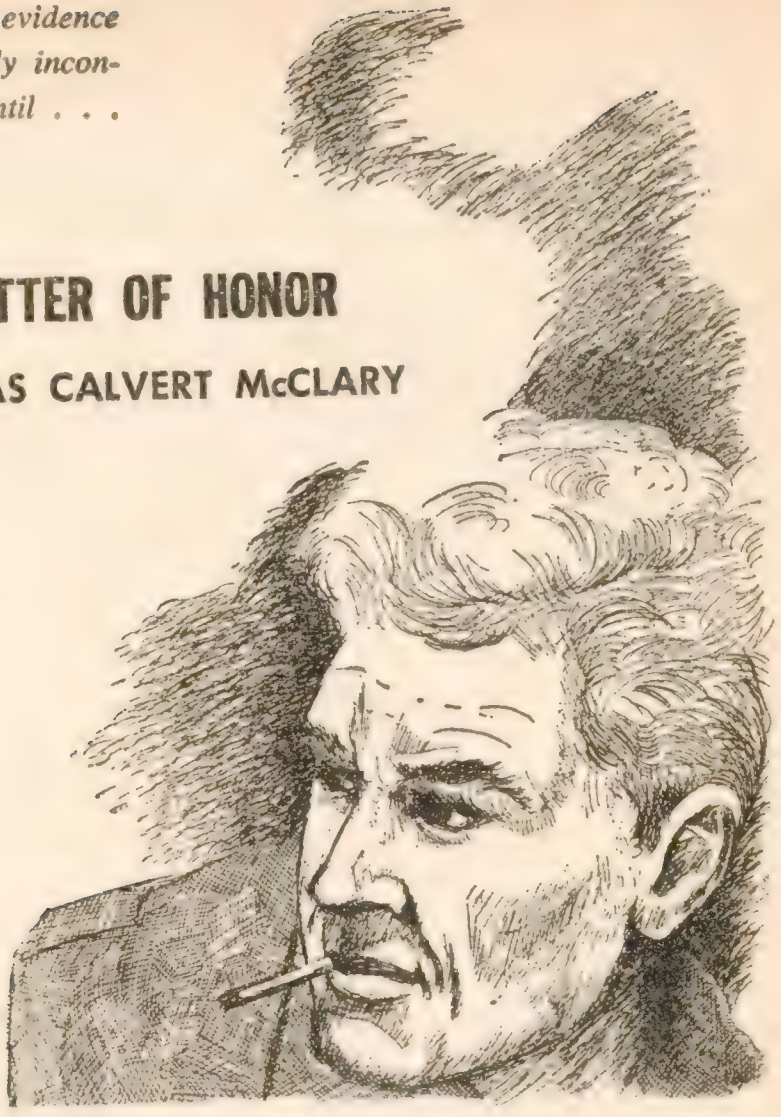
He had thrown his life away for a doll. To assert that she had conspired with him would be a flattery which he begrudged her.

"The dope is that she hadn't the guts for a job like that. I listened outside the box at the dance hall while she was telephoning. I saw my chance. She didn't know that I intended to kill Chaundry."

The murder evidence seemed tragically inconclusive . . . until . . .

A MATTER OF HONOR

by THOMAS CALVERT McCLARY



THERE CAN BE little doubt that Detective Maines suspected murder, yet it was chiefly his own evidence that caused the Coroner's Jury to dismiss the case as *"Suicide."*

His evidence was entirely honest, as was all the testimony presented, for that matter, except for one item. Rupert Leighton did not fire the shot that killed him.

The Medical Examiner's report stated that Leighton had died instantly from a .38 automatic bullet

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shot from approximately six inches from his chest. Ballistics verified that the bullet came from the pistol found in Leighton's hand, and simply raised the most negligent mention of the angle of penetration. Lab testified that there were the usual traces of powder on Leighton's gunhand.

Detective Maines testified that the pistol had belonged to Leighton, and that he had removed it from the case holding his very large collection at some very recent date, and that both the exterior and shell case held distinct prints of the deceased. He further testified that there was no print of Laddie Falkner's on the gun, and that no trace of gunpowder had been found on Falkner's person.

There had been, however, a slight trace of gun oil on his shirt cuff. It seemed of minor significance and Falkner was quick to point out that he must have brushed a finger across the gun when he crossed the room and knelt beside the fallen man—which was probably technically true and could not be ruled out as a possibility.

Margot Leighton had some slight traces of blood upon her sweater, but she explained its presence by stating she had rushed to her husband the instant he fired the shot. As she was holding his head and crying hysterically when the sheriff's men reached the house as a result of Falkner's phone call Maines saw no reason to doubt her statement.

It looked like an open and shut case of suicide and probably would not call for so much detailed testimony, except for the fact that the wrong man was dead. Rupert Leighton had every legitimate reason to blow hell out of Laddie Falkner, and he must have come to Falkner's house with precisely that intention. For Laddie Falkner was Santa Monica's number one cad.

Margot's story of her involvement with him supplied a possible motive for suicide rather than murder. The whole region was sympathetic, and the story spread a sordid but believable whitewash on the indiscretions of a great many other women. All of them grasped on the excuse that they had been seized by the same uncontrollable infatuation—an irresistable compulsion which smashed aside their virtue, and which had nothing to do with their love for their husbands.

There was simply something about Laddie Falkner that made women lose their heads completely. But before the coroner's jury, Margot had presented a particularly touching picture, because the whole community knew that she and Rupert Leighton had been so adoring and trusting that there had never been a moment in their married life that could have given birth to scandal.

In fact, Rupert Leighton had been so completely sure of his wife that he had openly scoffed at the danger which Laddie Falkner had presented.

And that, of course, supplied the motive that might have changed his intentions from murder to suicide. When he learned that she actually had succumbed to Falkner's vicious charms, it changed him from an adoring male to a man who felt that he had been betrayed in so cruel a fashion that he had no longer any desire to go on living.

As I said, the incident took place in Falkner's bachelor house, where Rupert Leighton had come, armed, and presumably in an unsettled emotional state. These facts were very important to any consideration of the possibility of foul play.

Falkner had built the house himself. It was set out on the tip of a tiny peninsula that recklessly defied the onslaught of the green Pacific. I had always suspected that Falkner had chosen the location in a moment of ironic consideration for his own position in society, for the peninsula was composed of sandstone, and theoretically, it should have been wiped out by the first storm of major dimensions. But it continued to survive, and had even increased its beach front!

Falkner had lived there thirteen years, and it was said that every month of that time he had seduced the wife of a friend or acquaintance. Even in his own opinion, he was an unmitigated rat. But there was a sardonic candor about him that rather fascinated me.

On the two or three occasions when I became rather caustic about his destruction of decent women, my criticism sparked terrific humor in him. "Doesn't it occur to you," he chuckled, "that no decent woman would tolerate me around ten minutes?"

How can you answer a philosophy like that?

I was a guest at his home when he first met Margot Leighton. She was no fool, and she was head over heels in love with her husband. She appeared to be amused by Falkner's predatory audacity, and I was a little surprised, but certainly not worried, when I heard that she was seeing him occasionally—making a lightly flirtatious game of it.

You see, she'd started the flirtation for a lark, a hoax on a notorious louse. But suddenly he stopped being a louse and she felt cheated. She simply had to raise the stakes to win the game and have her laugh. *So she went on the make!*

I will say this much for Laddie. He'd really fallen for her and was ready to act the gentleman. But Margot had to see the tiger. And she did. And it was an animal such as she'd never imagined in her life.

Self centered, utterly ruthless, atavistic. He pounced on her emotions and clawed them raw. He left her quivering, but compulsively hungry for more. She was that kind of a woman.

When it was over he wasn't conscience-stricken exactly, but sorry that he'd spoiled a relationship that was certainly novel in his life. I have an idea that he seriously tried to change the new relationship back to just plain friendship. But of course that didn't work, so he stopped seeing her, or at least, stopped pursuing her.

But Margot was hooked. She wouldn't let him alone. He'd roused the pagan in her, and even though she knew it might wreck her marriage she couldn't give him up. Her feelings for Rupert hadn't changed. It was simply that another self had come alive inside of her, and she was powerless to save herself.

Naturally, that state of things couldn't last. At first Rubert sensed it, but refused to come to grips with it. It was simply impossible for him to comprehend how a woman whom he so utterly adored—and who appeared to be still deeply in love with him—could be so outrageously two-faced and disloyal.

Eventually, he could no longer shut his eyes to the truth but he still couldn't believe it was her fault in any way. He thought Laddie had used some of his old tricks —liquor, dope, lies, maybe even blackmail.

I think I know the day he decided to kill Falkner.

I was over swimming at Rupert's Capri-blue tile pool, and Margot was doing her best to be a good hostess. But the jokes and repartee were falling as flat as the drinks, and there was a physical feeling of decision about Rupert, like the feel of molten lava under malpais. I decided to do something about it.

My sister was visiting at the time, and I happened to know that Rupert had a business trip up north to make. So I suggested that he let me invite Margot and my sister for a week sail down to Ensenada. Rather to my surprise he agreed almost with his old enthusiasm. It was a crazy idea, I suppose, but thought a cooling off period for them both might save the situation.

Well, we made our trip and Rupert made his trip, and nothing untoward happened to Laddie in the interim. Rupert was still away when we returned, and I took a friend's dubious privilege of going over to Laddie's house for a straight-from-the-shoulder talk with him.

I didn't get very hardboiled for the reason that Falkner looked sick and gaunt with worry. For one of the few times in my life, I felt profoundly sorry for him.

He said desperately, "You've

got to believe me. I don't want Margot to wreck her marriage. But I can't get her to break off. I've tried everything, even insult!"

"Well, you'd better try harder." I said. "I'm afraid of what Rupert may do. He's in a dangerous frame of mind."

"I'm not worried about Rupert," he said. "I just don't want to wreck Margot's life."

In spite of his past, he was laying it level, and that made me feel a little more hopeful. We had two more drinks and I reminded him again that he had to handle this deal, even if it meant going into orbit. He agreed with a surprising seriousness.

That was three days before Rupert returned. Evidently, when he did return, Margot stayed out beyond the usual supper hour, and that must have been when he got his gun and went to Falkner's and found her there.

But damn it, he would not have taken that particular gun! I've shot everything from clay pigeons to moose with Rupert Leighton, and I knew the small gun he would automatically pocket for a matter of honor, and it was still in the gun case by the time I got into the house to check it—for of course, I had to take my time with Detective Maines nosing around.

Then the thought struck me—had it been there all the time? It could have been out of the house and somehow returned. But the smaller gun, the death gun?

I broke the speed law getting over to see Margot.

She looked terrible. The ordeal of Rupert's death and the sensational publicity of the inquest had left her white and shaken. But being Margot, her mind was sharp enough to know why I'd come, and I scarcely said a word. She simply mixed drinks, nodded and said, "All right, I'll tell you. I think then I'll just take a nice long swim. You're the best friend I have, and I want you to know."

She went and stood at the wide French doors opening on the terrace and looked at the sunset. "You see," she said. "No part of the affair was Laddie's fault. He wouldn't have started it, and he kept trying to break it off."

Well, Margot had tried all of the three days after our return to see him, and he wouldn't see her. She knew when Rupert would get back and the mood he might be in, and she wanted to get things straight with Laddie before that.

How does a woman motivated by ungovernable compulsion really know all of her thoughts?

Anyway, she had finally gotten the little gun—the death gun—and driven to Falkner's, with some wild idea of scaring him into continuing the affair. They'd still been arguing and she'd been full of dramatics when Rupert walked in with his favorite gun and death in

his eye, and she knew he was going to kill Laddie when he got through talking.

"How could I let him kill a man for something that was my fault?" Margot demanded. "I still had the small gun, but he didn't know it of course. And I knew time was growing short for Laddie. So I ran over to Rupert with some crazy idea that I could use my gun to slap his gun out of his hand."

Margot turned back from the window. "Well, that's when it happened. My gun went off. I was stunned, and before I could clear my wits, Laddie had rushed over and switched guns, wanting to protect me from a murder charge. He'd wiped the guns, and hidden Rupert's gun, so that if I told what had happened, I'd involve him, too."

Margot sighed and shook her head. "I don't know how Laddie got Rupert's gun back into our gun room. But they didn't hold us after the laboratory report came through. Just a warning to be on hand for the inquest."

So that's the way Rupert died.

And that explains Margot Leighton's last swim.

I went to the morgue to identify her body at the request of Detective Maines. It had taken several days and a storm to wash the body ashore. Oddly—or perhaps not so oddly—Laddie Falkner had capsized in that same storm, and his body was there also.

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Maines said nothing direct about the case. But he did remark musingly as we left the morgue, "Sort of a matter of honor on all sides, wouldn't you say?"

He thought of himself as a very shrewd and far-sighted murderer. And that was a mistake.

The Dry Well

by PETER KENNEDY

TOM JORDON toted his figures on the adding machine and frowned at a discrepancy of sixteen cents with the balance that showed in the books of Blaine's Hardware.

It was very important for balances to total properly. It was more important to Tom Jordon than to Blaine's, for this was chiefly what the tax auditors watched for in their annual check-up.

As long as his books were kept efficiently, he had nothing to worry about. For five years he had been conducting a very successful criminal enterprise for a store this size, where the inventory sheets were actually a stock-room check and did not break down front-of-the-store sales.

As bookkeeper, he also did the banking. His method was simply to endorse selected customer checks for cashing instead of for deposit, and to pocket the money. Simultaneously, he would destroy sales records of purchases the customers had made. Thus there was no reason for the auditors to become suspicious. It did not even mean that the company books, deposits and withdrawals, had to coincide perfectly.

He checked through his entries

for the second time, found the discrepancy, and for precaution, toted his figures on the machine again with a feeling of justified complacency. He felt no particular guilt for what he was doing, his only concern being that some small, unintentional act of carelessness might give him away.

Fifteen years ago, Roscoe Blaine had started this business on a shoestring, and talked Jordon into sweating twelve and fifteen hours a day—"just until things got started." The ultimate recompense was to have been a share in the business and an executive's salary, two items Roscoe Blaine had carefully forgotten.

For that, Jordon hated him, but he had found a highly profitable way of evening the score. The only trouble was that it hadn't done him much good financially on a long-term basis. He always seemed to pick losers at the racetrack, and had no luck with cards.

Jordan had just finished checking the tabulator when he heard Blaine getting out of his car in the parking space directly below the open window of his office in the rear of the store. Blaine was saying in his usual self-important manner, "No, I want to be here when you make the survey and put in the system. This is an involved business, Horace, and there are things only I could tell you. The stock simply isn't turning over the profit it should. I need cost accounting and merchandize control systems set up."

Jordon couldn't seem to breathe for an instant. He glanced out the window and identified Horace Stoddard of Stoddard & Lothrop, the smartest cost accounting firm in town. Stoddard had stopped to light a cigarette and Blaine had paused to wait, so Jordon heard the remainder of what he was saying.

"I'll dictate a contract memo now," Jordon's employer went on. "But I want a week's vacation before you begin, and I might as well take it while my wife's still at the lodge. She plans to stay up there until the end of the month, but I won't have to join her. I'll go somewhere else."

The two men laughed and passed out of view. Jordon remained standing motionless beside the window, his temples pounding. Cost accounting and merchandize control! Good God, they'd be into every separate sale for the past two years!

Jordon lit a cigarette with shaking fingers and thought of what he might do to stave off trouble. There was simply nothing he could do except vanish—unless Roscoe Blaine dropped dead suddenly and all plans were cancelled pending settlement of the estate.

But Jordon couldn't vanish. He'd have needed more money than he had in the bank to pull

up stakes and start over somewhere else. He desperately needed a breathing spell, an opportunity to keep the business running just as it was until he had a chance to acquire a decent bankroll.

And the only possible way he could avoid detection was to make sure Blaine would not remain alive long enough to accuse him.

His own wife had gone to visit her mother a few days ago for two weeks. He was alone. His house was well-hidden from the road by shrubs and trees, and he knew just the right place for what had come into his mind—if he could just get Blaine over to the house. Who'd start wondering about the old man's disappearance, right after he'd announced that he intended to take a vacation? And his wife would not be returning to the city for two or three more weeks.

Blaine appeared in the office so suddenly that Jordon was startled and had difficulty in concealing his agitation. Blaine seemed in fairly good spirits after his talk with Stoddard, but he managed to refrain from smiling, or acting in any way relaxed and amiable.

"I want you to run downtown before the bank closes and pick me up twenty-five hundred dollars," he grunted. "Bring it back here and put it in the safe. Then take my car over to the garage and tell them to check it over very carefully. I'm driving out into the country tomorrow, for a week's vacation.

Blaine stopped and frowned. "I suppose I'd better have you check over the books and put them in order for when I get back. I'm having Stoddard and Lothrop in to make some merchandize studies. But I won't have time this afternoon to talk, and I've got an important engagement tonight."

Jordon now had himself well under control. "I'll be home tomorrow," he said. "I could take the books home with me."

"Good idea," Blaine nodded. "You're right on the way to the golf club and I want to run over there for my clubs in the morning. There'll be some good players where I'm vacationing. Tell the garage to tune up and deliver the car at my house," he added. "And by seven tonight, understand? One of the boys can drive me home."

When Blaine left Jordon remained deep in thought for a moment. Blaine's house was not too far from his own, and it would be no trick to drive his car and park it in the garage. When the police investigated, it would simply look as if Blaine had changed his plans and left for his vacation with somebody else. He would have had no opportunity to pick up his golf clubs, and that also would be noted. It would be assumed that he'd left with some woman—a relaxation pattern he was partial to.

There would be twenty-five hundred dollars, and two or three week's grace for Jordon. And, there'd be no reason for suspicion to fall on him. In any case, there'd be no evidence.

He attended to first things first, getting the twenty-five hundred in small bills at the bank and making sure to joke about bosses on vacation. He left Blaine's car at the garage and had one of the mechanics bring him back. He collected the company books and took them home.

It was just sundown and he still had the light of dusk to work by. He examined the placement of the old well outside the cottage. It was at the edge of the orchard, well-screened from the road and his inquisitive neighbors. It hadn't been used for years, and had gone completely dry.

The well was situated about thirty feet from the flagstone path which ran from the drive to the front door. It was covered with half-rotted boards, which crumbled a little when he lifted the cover. A stale, musty smell assailed his nostrils as air from above filtered down into the well. His flashlight showed the walls still firm. There was no glint of water, although there was a thick encrustation of mildew down at the bottom.

He took the precaution of finding the emergency kerosenè lantern and lowering it to test the air. Beyond the halfway-line, the flame gutted, then leaped high and its flame turned blue. Jordon experienced a long moment of panic as he envisioned his perfect plan crumbling. But the flame gradually returned to almost its normal color as the lantern touched bottom.

"Firedamp," he said to himself in reference to the signs of noxious gas. "But not too much of it, and it began to thin as soon as fresh air reached its level."

Still, the stuff was tricky and damned dangerous. One of its worst qualities was that it contained almost no warning odor. Another was that it could paralyze a man very rapidly without causing any sensation of what was happening until it happened, and this it could do even when it was not strong enough to kill him.

However, to a man in the hardware business, it required little imagination and a minimum of effort to rid the well of foul air. He got his extension cord, and lowered a vacuum cleaner into the well, letting it remain at the bottom for fifteen minutes. Then he got out an electric fan and let it hang down, to stir the air while he went inside to enjoy his dinner.

After coffee, he got into his fishing waders, found proper tools and a drop ladder, and took his highway emergency light down into the well. There was about three inches of muck at the bottom, but

his footing remained firm. The side-shelf was dry. The air was not good, but it had freshened. A lighted match gutted, but continued to burn.

Jordon set to work rapidly but carefully, knowing precisely what he wanted to do. He pried out a strip of bricks just above the bottom shelf, piling them carefully at hand until he had cleared a space about two feet by five. These old country wells had been well-constructed. The masonry above the gap did not even slump.

He then began to work with a crowbar, loosening the soil behind the cleared space. It gave off the rank, raw stink of subsoil suddenly opened to air. It was difficult to work, but gradually it broke loose in chunks. In time, he had a rough crypt cut out that would be big enough to entomb Blaine's body. Who'd ever think to search *behind* the masonry at the bottom of a well?

He shored the top up with boards so that it would not cave in during the night. He was soaking with sweat, dizzy from the bad air, but satisfied, as he tied his extra tools to the hoist rope and then laboriously re-climbed the drop ladder.

He hoisted his tools and got them back to the garage, hosed down his boots and scrubbed himself thoroughly, and then came back to the well for a smoke. He left the drop ladder hanging, but coiled the hoist rope and hid it nearby in the tall grass along with his powerful battery lamp.

Then he stood relaxing and enjoying his smoke, leaning on the old well parapet and listening for any sound of falling rubble. Occasionally, he caught the faint sound of small stuff that had been kicked loose, but apparently, the wall was solid and going to hold.

The sky was clouding up, though, and this was a season when hard, pelting rain storms could sweep suddenly out of the hills. He wanted no cascade of water going down that well tonight, to flood the bottom or loosen the area around the crypt, and as a final precaution, he closed the old trap door. Tomorrow, he wouldn't have to spend much time down there, for all he'd do would be to stuff in the body and replace the bricks. What little foul air regathered, he could take for that brief space.

Cooled now and confident that his work had been well done, he went inside to mix a long double drink and enjoy it while watching a Boris Karloff show on TV without the snide comments of his wife to spoil it.

Roscoe Blaine arrived early next morning with a big business man's bustling efficiency precisely at ten thirty. He would lunch early at the golf club and then leave for his vacation, he announced.

Actually, it had not been necessary to have the company books

on hand, for Blaine didn't know anything about ledgers or bookkeeping. It had been equally unnecessary for him to see Jordon at all, for he had no clear idea of what Stoddard and Lothrop meant to do or the information that they'd require. The whole "conference" was a show to blow up his own self-importance.

Blaine managed to spend an hour, however, snorting and growling executive cliches and phrases. When he took his departure, he preceded his employee down the flagstone path toward his car, just as Jordon had anticipated.

Jordon followed closely, holding the heavy pipe wrench he'd picked up from beside his entrance. He talked glibly, still asking puzzled questions in an almost normal voice, although his mouth was dry, and his heart had begun a furious pounding.

At a point opposite the well, where a lilac bush threw its heaviest shadow, Jordon lifted the pipe wrench, and brought it down on the back of Blaine's head. There was a soggy crunch. Blaine sank to the ground with a groan, and sprawled motionless beside the path.

Blood began to splotch his iron-grey hair, and seep from his lacerated scalp into the grass, staining it a deep crimson.

Jordon swayed for an instant, appalled by what he had done. But gradually he mastered his panic. He tossed the wrench toward the well, and set to work without loss of time. It was no great task to pull even as heavy a man as Blaine was across smooth grass. In a few minutes, he had him roped and hoisted into the well and was letting him down with the aid of a pulley.

Jordan picked up the wrench and threw it in after him. Then he carefully examined his hands for any telltale smears of blood and returned across the flagstone path to put Blaine's car out of sight in the garage until evening.

He put on his waders while he was in the garage, as they could be easily hosed-down afterwards. Then he returned to the well, got his power light from where he'd left it in the grass, snapped it on and lowered it into the darkness on a light line.

Looking down, he could see Blaine's body distinctly. It was resting against the wall above the shelf, as if the dead man were sitting there meditating. But there was not a thing at the top of the hole to indicate that anything unusual had taken place there recently.

Jordon wiped sweat from his brow, and grimly climbed over the wall onto the ladder. It was a chain affair, flexible, and it kept swaying precariously. But it served. At intervals he paused, breathing harshly. A few feet beneath the halfway mark he was

conscious of the deadness of the air, along with the increasing, raw, rank odor of the earth he'd removed yesterday.

His power lamp gave almost too much light. It bounced from the musty, damp walls at the bottom, filling the hole with an unnatural brash glare. Also, it gave off a surprising amount of heat down in this airless space.

Should have left the fan hanging here all night, he thought. But at least, he was nearing the end of his ordeal.

He searched Blaine's hip pocket, found his wallet bulging with the sheaf of money Jordon had left in the safe yesterday. He jammed the currency into his pocket, and tossed the wallet into the crypt, complimenting himself on his presence of mind. It was by neglecting such details that most murderers got themselves caught eventually. The average man would have held on to Blaine's whole wallet, and then wouldn't have known how to dipose of it in any case.

He found the wrench sticking upright in the muck and tossed the instrument after the wallet. Then he began to maneuver Blaine until his body came to rest against the center of the hole. As the dead man's weight was still partially suspended from the rope, his body should not have been hard to handle. But Jordon was straining, fighting, by the time he had him in place where he could untie the hoist rope.

That was when he saw the bubble of dampness in there thrust out of the raw earth wall. It grew slowly until it burst, and trickled to the bottom. That was when he understood why he was suddenly so weak and dizzy. The earth behind the bricks he had removed held gas, and all night long the crypt had been releasing its lethal poison.

With a sudden panicked cry, Jordon wheeled away and floundered toward the ladder. *Get up, get out of here fast!*

But the chain ladder twisted under his clumsily booted feet and clung too close against the wall. And there was no longer strength in his arms to pull himself. He was as trapped as if there'd been no ladder.

He fell back gasping, staring up at the small circle of daylight rimmed by the top of the hole. He couldn't make it. He'd never get out now! Of course, the gas might cease forming. It might wear off. It might not be lethal. If he saved his strength and waited, by some act of providence, help might come.

And if it did, he was down there with the evidence of his grisly crime, trapped and caught redhanded. He'd die in the electric chair if the hole failed to kill him.

A convulsive sobbing made his whole body shudder.

(Continued from other side)

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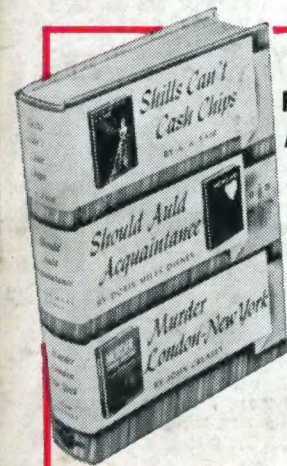

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